Aesthetics of zero tolerance: Psychogeographic and photographic explorations of graffiti and street art in Norway

Summary of dissertation

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Zero tolerance policies against graffiti make strong aesthetic judgements about what is and is not acceptable in public urban space. Such policies strive to rid the city of graffiti, swiftly remove illegal expressions, and deter future interventions through the imposition of severe penalties. Such regimes are extreme and have their origins in ‘broken windows’ theory views that liken graffiti to signs of social disorder leading to more dangerous crimes. Inspired by approaches taken in New York in the mid-1990s, zero tolerance policies were implemented with unique severity and efficacy in Nordic cities like Oslo, Stockholm, and Helsinki. Following several years of intense anti-graffiti discourse, Oslo officially adopted zero tolerance in 2000.

Zero tolerance approaches toward graffiti have been criticised considerably. Described as ineffective and failing to eradicate graffiti, such strict regimes tend to worsen the quality of graffiti and increase the quantity of the most ‘undesirable’ of expressions. Despite these assertions in the literature, there has been little aesthetic study on the implications of zero tolerance policy. If zero tolerance does not rid the city of graffiti and street art, just what does it achieve? What does a city with zero tolerance look like? Taking the city of Oslo as its main case, this dissertation has both theoretical and methodological ambitions. Firstly, this project seeks to understand the aesthetic implications of zero tolerance policy upon the urban landscape. Secondly, this project attempts to develop a methodology for studying graffiti and street art in the city. This dissertation aims to answer how graffiti and street art exist in a city with zero tolerance, what the broader aesthetic implications of zero tolerance policy are, and how a methodology combining psychogeographic walking and photography can be used to answer critical urban questions such as these. This dissertation draws upon extensive empirical fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2017. This includes nearly 300 kilometres of walking and the taking of over 25 000 photographs. While Oslo is my main case, walking in other cities has helped to contextualise that which I have seen and not seen in Oslo. The methodology builds on an extensive pilot project conducted in Montréal between 2011 and 2013 during which I walked 600 kilometres and took over 15 000 photographs. I additionally draw on experiences walking in Stavanger and participating in various capacities at the annual urban art festival Nuart. This article-based dissertation draws upon this empirical material and addresses the above questions in one essay, three single-authored papers, and a book of photographs.

The first work ‘Aesthetic appreciation of tagging’ is a short philosophical essay that uses the concept of positive aesthetics to reflect upon aesthetic appreciation. The essay is intended to provoke the reader and questions how we appreciate more figurative street art works such as murals in comparison with the most maligned of expressions: tagging.
The second work ‘Aesthetic practices of psychogeography and photography’ discusses the merits of using ‘aesthetic practices’ as methods to study graffiti and street art. Psychogeography and photography can be understood as aesthetic practices both for their sensory dimensions and for their connections to performing or making art. Inspired by the dérive or drift of the Situationists – avant-garde artists and urban theorists primarily active in the 1950s and 1960s in Paris – I walk the city psychogeographically, attempting to get lost in the city and taking photographs as I navigate. The paper argues that the playful and artistic dimensions of these practices make them inductive and revelatory methods for exploring the city. The methods are useful for revealing spatial and temporal variations and materialities, encourage new ways of looking at the city, and have potential for exploring the aesthetic politics of cities.

The third work ‘Aesthetics of zero tolerance’ draws on the results from fieldwork to explore the aesthetic implications of zero tolerance policy. This paper discusses some of the characteristics of zero tolerance policy, peculiarities of the Nordic approach and Oslo case, and contextualises the discussion within broader aesthetic debates within the city of Oslo. Supported by photographs, this paper suggests four aesthetic outcomes observed during fieldwork. These include the presence of aesthetic tensions between graffiti and outdoor advertising, the presence of buffed and negated spaces, changes in graffiti style and form, and differences in scales of street art. The paper argues for more agonistic and tolerant approaches to policing graffiti, concluding that less rigid strategies are necessary for enabling more just and democratic urban aesthetics.

The fourth work 'Invisible walls and the sexualised city' delves deeper into the prevalence of outdoor advertising, whose presences increasingly diverted my gaze during fieldwork. These advertisements very frequently contain highly idealised and sexualised representations of women’s bodies. This paper explores the presence of sexualised images of women’s bodies and considers them within the existing gendered divisions of the city. This paper argues that these images contribute to the production of sexualised space that intensifies in the night-time city when advertising images are illuminated and women’s mobilities differentiated. This paper additionally demonstrates the inductive nature of psychogeographic walking and photography.

This dissertation advocates for new ways of looking at and seeing graffiti and street art in the city, facilitated through the support and analysis of photographs. The fifth work is the ‘Book of photographs’, consisting of approximately 200 photographs, and helps the reader visualise the topics in the written material. The book accommodates photographs that are more artistic in nature and gives an appreciation of the task of working with large quantities of visual data. This book together with the four written works and the introductory framework adds to discussions on zero tolerance and the policing of graffiti. This study is unique in its aesthetic approach to the topic as well as its innovative use of methodology. The dissertation demonstrates how psychogeographic walking and photography can be used to answer critical urban questions. As aesthetics are more frequently implicated in how urban space is governed, such approaches to studying the city may become increasingly useful.