DOI: 10.1111/area.12725

REGULAR PAPER



Check for updates

Photography, composition, and the ephemeral city

Emma Arnold 🗅



Correspondence

Emma Arnold, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.

Email: emma.arnold@sosgeo.uio.no

Abstract

Photography is ultimately concerned with the ephemeral – with capturing and preserving transient moments. As a place in constant flux, full of ephemera and the ephemeral, the city has long been an important site for photographers. Those who study the city are increasingly incorporating photography into their research thanks to changing and more accessible technologies and epistemological shifts across the social sciences. Photographs are taking on new roles and are not only adjuncts or images that serve to illustrate or support text; they are integral to varied methodologies that centre the creation of images, from participatory methods using photo-voice to visual urban ethnographies. This paper considers how a move from illustrative and documentary style to more creative and evocative photography is changing the ways geographers compose images. Geographers are not just taking images but making them, involving themselves in a form of hybrid geographic and artistic practice. This shift involves a move from more objective to subjective framings and, in some cases, from more passive to active techniques. Taking graffiti photography as a departure, this paper explores how a hybrid geographic and artistic approach influences the composition and aesthetic qualities of images. The paper takes the reader through five compositions emerging from a study on the politics of graffiti in Norway: 1. Documentation; 2. Obstruction; 3. Abstraction; 4. Reflection; and 5. Negation. These compositions are useful in understanding the place of graffiti, one of the most contested and quintessentially ephemeral features of the urban landscape. This analysis demonstrates how a divergence from more typical representations is important in conducting critical urban photographic research, how an artistic eye is about the analytic as well as the aesthetic.

KEYWORDS

ephemeral, graffiti, photography, psychogeography, street art, urban photography

INTRODUCTION

Leaves are sprayed and striped with neon hues, white-washed, painted silver, chrome-flecked colour-speckled weeds pushing through and pressing against cracks in concrete, rising against the rough edges of plywood walls heavy with paint (Figures 1

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). © 2021 The Authors. Area published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)

Area. 2021;00:1-12. wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/area and 2). They overlook the railway tracks visible between breaks in the wall and the open spaces of bent metal fences. They look past the signals and the passing trains and over to the crooked headstones of Gamlebyen Cemetery on the eastern side of Oslo. Colourful plastic caps lie scattered, depending on the season sometimes frozen encaustic in ice. Otherwise, they roll around the edge of the skate basin at this legal graffiti wall, next to discarded vinyl gloves and other items that have outlived their use; long-lived matter whose usefulness is as temporary as the art works on the walls painted here. Paint rollers dry stiff in plastic trays. Paint hangs in long parallel candy-coloured drips in suspended state, solid but appearing liquid. Aerosol cans pile up, flow over, fill transparent bags that are dotted with thick drops of condensation (Figure 3). These are not the typical images of colourful stylised letters conjured when thinking of graffiti. Yet as I take photographs and seek to understand the place of graffiti in a city with zero tolerance politics, it is scenes and images such as these that enhance my understanding. They hint at the urban materialities of the practices and of spaces such as this. They convey how these spaces are used, and even reveal how often, suggesting their heightened importance in a city with stringent rules against graffiti (Figure 4). They are also the result of my own shifts in composing images, moving further from pure documentary and more toward the artistic and at times abstract.

Graffiti and street art are forms of urban ephemera, part of a temporary and ever-changing collection of markings in the city. They are vulnerable to erasure given the publicness of their creation and existence and their frequent illegality. Graffiti has been an especially contested presence in cities and the subject of a range of harsh and revanchist urban policies (see Arnold, 2019b; Cresswell, 1992; Kramer, 2010; Shobe & Banis, 2014; Shobe & Conklin, 2018; Young, 2010, 2014). Photography has been instrumental to graffiti and street art movements. Film, print media, and images shared on online platforms have all been important in disseminating these visual urban cultures. Photographs have also been essential forms of cultural preservation given



FIGURE 1 White-washed, chrome-flecked leaves at legal graffiti wall in Gamlebyen, Oslo (2019)



FIGURE 2 Colour-speckled leaves at legal graffiti wall in Gamlebyen, Oslo (2019)



FIGURE 3 A turquoise spray-paint can and condensation on a plastic bag at legal graffiti wall in Gamlebyen, Oslo (2019)



FIGURE 4 Folded-over layers of spray-paint on collapsed plywood at legal graffiti wall in Gamlebyen, Olso (2019)

the ephemerality and precariousness of the works. As the photograph frequently becomes a stand-in for the original marking or artwork after its erasure, photography of graffiti and street art has historically had very typical compositions. Unlike traditional street photography that venerates the relationship between people and the city, often through a very masculine gaze, graffiti and street art photography tends to be static and absent of human presence. Though artists and the occasional passer-by may intrude the frame, the subjects of images tend most often to be the inanimate and static art form. Photographs then become two-dimensional reproductions of the original artwork. Photographs are then forms of document, a visual record that foregrounds the artworks, in which the transient art depicted squarely in the frame, often close-up, supersedes the artistic framing of the photograph. Similar trends are apparent in academic research that uses visual methods to study graffiti and street art. The photograph produced as part of visual research often supresses photographic artistry in favour of recording and documenting images that can be picked apart and analysed systematically – semiotically or otherwise. Images that document in this way tend to offer some semblance of objectivity, a snapshot of "reality" to support text rather than part of an investigative and analytic process. This is because, as John Berger writes, photography is a kind of remembrance or trace of reality (Berger, 2011, p. 54). This link to reality is what distinguishes photography from other forms of image-making.

Photography is part of our urban geographical imagination, of how we understand the city, past and present. Schwartz and Ryan write that "to explore photography and the geographical imagination is to understand how photographs were, and continue to be, part of the practices and processes by which people come to know the world and situate themselves in space and time" (2003, p. 18). Though more geographers are incorporating photography into their research, considerations of the practices and processes in which they are embedded remain uneven. Gillian Rose (2006) distinguishes between photographs as having a

supportive or supplemental role when created by the researcher. Rose (2006) positions methods of photo-elicitation and photo-documentation under the umbrella of supportive roles for the ways in which the photograph necessitates interpretation by the researcher in both methods. Supplemental photographs are different as they are often presented on their own terms, allowing a greater degree of interpretation on behalf of the viewer. They may serve as an accompaniment to written arguments working "more actively to convince us that those arguments are correct" (Rose, 2006, p. 247). Supplemental photography may also act on our urban geographical imaginations, transforming how we envisage and understand the city. While the increased use of photography is connected to the visual turn in geography, it is also connected to a creative and imaginative one.

Creative shifts within geography are enlivening the discipline (Crang, 2010; Hawkins, 2015; Hunt, 2014) and are a result of fundamental epistemological changes that have opened up space for embodied and experimental ways of producing geographic knowledge (Hawkins, 2015). Hawkins (2011) recognises two dominant streams of creative geographic work. The first includes research that engages in a "dialogue" with art and the second involves aspects of "doing" and incorporates artistic work as part of research (Hawkins, 2011; Madge, 2014). Yet photography's potential as a dual artistic and interrogative urban research method is not well developed in the geographic literature. Many are circling the idea, however. Some geographers refer to the potential of non-representational photography, which is a way geographers are thinking and writing around the edges of research photography as artistic investigation. Reflecting on the use of images in urban fieldwork, Latham and McCormack ask "what can images do if we don't think of them primarily in terms of representation?" (2009, p. 260). They suggest that, by drawing from non-representational theory and relating to images that do more than represent, we may find ways of "thinking with images" and "thinking through the aesthetic" (2009, pp. 260–1). The "aesthetic" can be understood in different ways: of being related to sensory experience and/or the theoretical study of or the creation of art (see Arnold, 2019a).

Abandoning a rigid desire to capture reality and instead allowing for a more experimental or artistic approach influences the composition of photographs. This paper explores these artistic shifts in framing and suggests that they are part of the analytical process. This paper contributes to new writings on urban photography (see Hawkins, 2010; Hunt, 2014, 2016; Nordström, 2017), more broadly to discussions on doing and making art in human geography (see Hawkins, 2011) and methods of studying urban art (see Andron, 2016, 2018; Arnold, 2019a; Bloch, 2018; Hansen & Flynn, 2015; Honig & MacDowall, 2017; MacDowall & de Souza, 2017), and to work on the politics of graffiti and street art (see Arnold, 2019b; Iveson, 2009; Young, 2010). This paper builds on my prior research using aesthetic practices – understood to be both artistic and sensory – for studying urban aesthetic politics (Arnold, 2019a). This paper begins with a brief overview of graffiti and street art photography. I then present a series of compositions and images taken during an extensive photographic study primarily undertaken in Oslo, Norway. The paper concludes with reflections on how approaching urban photography as a hybrid artistic and geographic inquiry has merits for critical studies of the city.

2 | GRAFFITI AND STREET ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography has been crucial to the graffiti and street art movements and instrumental in disseminating the visual culture from cities in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s to the rest of the world. Photography of urban art is an extension of street photography, which emerged in the 19th century. Street photography remains one of the most prominent genres of urban photography, with an easily recognisable aesthetic and feel. Street photography celebrates life and movement, often through images of people in the city (Hunt, 2014; Nordström, 2017; Tormey, 2012). This genre of photography captures the interaction between people and urban space, foregrounding human experience and emphasising emotion in the city. It often has an almost voyeuristic quality, particularly in images shot covertly from the hip. In photography's struggles for recognition as a fine art, photographs of the urban landscape underwent an important shift in the 20th century (Hawker, 2013). Rosemary Hawker (2013) notes how urban fine art photography sought to differentiate itself from street photography by erasing people from the frame. Instead, still and uninhabited landscapes became favoured. To some degree, this is mirrored in the large canon of graffiti and street art photography in which images have largely served the purpose of preservation. Understanding the photograph has been a preoccupation of theorists since photography's invention in the 19th century. Whether a photograph is real or an image, document or art have been primary concerns of theorists writing on photography (see Barthes, 2010; Benjamin, 1972; Sontag, 1979). With photography, there is always an underlying tension between "the real" and "the image," between "document" and "art." Graffiti and street art photography often involve a certain type of composition that serves to honour and preserve the ephemeral artworks. As Walter Benjamin writes, the "need to bring things spatially and humanly 'nearer' is almost an obsession today, as is the tendency to negate the unique or ephemeral quality of a given event by reproducing it photographically" (Benjamin in Sontag, 1979, p. 205). Photographs of graffiti and street art have become a stand-in for the work itself, a document of an ephemeral work of art that lives on after the original work's disappearance, images that become part of portfolios and collections. This style of photography is a testament to the impending erasure of the works it captures, celebrating an inevitable invisibility. Producing a record is important for work that frequently disappears and this desire to preserve influences the framing of images.

Researchers interested in graffiti and street art use photographs to illustrate text, engage with research participants, enhance understandings of the practices, and influence policy. Gregory J. Snyder describes using photographs or "flicks" of graffiti to develop his own understanding of the art form and to engage with graffiti writers in meaningful ways with the goal of demonstrating a "commitment to the culture" (Snyder, 2009, p. 15). Susan Hansen and Danny Flynn have advocated the use of longitudinal photography for street art research, a practice that involves repeatedly returning to sites to document changes (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). This type of photography is useful for demonstrating how spaces change over time. Researchers also study images of graffiti and street art taken by other photographers and shared on social media platforms (see MacDowall & de Souza, 2017). Sabina Andron makes compelling arguments for using photographs overlaid with text as a way to understand the semiotics of urban surfaces (Andron, 2016, 2018). The use of artistic approaches in the photographic study of graffiti and street art is less pronounced.

Using a methodology that pairs psychogeographic walking and photography (for a more detailed account of this methodology, see Arnold, 2019a), I have been studying how graffiti and street art exist in a city with a legacy of strict zero tolerance policies. This methodology is akin to a visual, urban (auto)ethnography – an embodied exploration of the city through walking and photography. Relying on these exploratory and aesthetic methods, I seek to understand the place and politics of graffiti and street art in Oslo (for more on these politics, see Arnold, 2019b). For this paper, I focus on graffiti as it has been disproportionately policed and part of a highly politicised public discourse in Oslo and other cities. My research has suggested that the aesthetic practices of psychogeographic walking together with photography are intuitive and revelatory, offering insight into spatial variations and materialities of the city (Arnold, 2019a). The following section presents a series of compositions that emerged through an artistic approach to photography, suggesting that more evocative image-making may deepen understandings and often in unexpected ways.

3 | FROM TAKING TO MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS

3.1 | Composition 1. Documentation

Photographs of graffiti often have a typical composition that captures the urban works in an integral way, frequently in natural light (Figure 5). Photographs frame works head-on, flattening the scene and excluding context. Images devoid of context can then feel both placeless and universal, a "could be anywhere" aesthetic. My own approach initially followed these trends, particularly in the early stages when my research questions were unformed and my photography more exploratory. The objectives of my research were not to create a photographic inventory of graffiti works and artists, nor did I seek to engage with the markings in a curatorial way. As this study was concerned with urban aesthetic politics, I was keen to explore how photography could evoke the nuances and politics of graffiti and street art that I was beginning to understand through analysis of local policy and discourse. I strived to



FIGURE 5 Typical graffiti photography compositions, Oslo (2016)

create photographs that did not simply document – as traditional graffiti photography has done – and endeavoured to take photographs that also caught subtleties of context and the rhythms of urban life. Through photography, I interrogated the city, asking: How does graffiti and street art exist in the city? How do these interventions interact with and change in the urban context? How might photography shift strong views that these interventions must be erased from the urban landscape? How might photography inspire policy that is more informed and democratic? These questions accompanied me on my psychogeographic and photographic walks in Oslo, influencing how I was making images, if perhaps on a subconscious level. My research questions influenced a move from documentation in my images to compositions that explored obstruction, abstraction, reflection, and negation.

3.2 | Composition 2. Obstruction

As my research progressed, I began to see patterns of obstruction and interference as I walked in the city and composed images. These physical obstructions are symbolic of how authorities interfere with the presence of graffiti in the city. An example of this can be seen in the image in Figure 6 that was taken on the eastern side of Oslo near the railway tracks, not far from the legal graffiti wall described in the opening vignette. Railway corridors and train cars are important sites for graffiti and their presence in these spaces reflects graffiti's historical connection with trains. The location and style of these pieces of graffiti evoke different places and times, from New York in the 1980s to any number of cities where graffiti is found in similar saturations around railway infrastructure. In this photograph, there are layers of obstruction. There is the fence that I am standing behind when I take this photograph. It is the soft blur that obscures the foreground of the image. In this image, the viewer can also see the fine lines of fencing on both sides of the railway tracks. These may provoke the viewer to wonder how these artists work in such a space, particularly when producing a large graffiti piece such as the one in focus, and to reflect on the risk artists take in working in such dangerous and potentially life-threatening spaces. The dominant graffiti is basked both in light and shadow, the shadow of overhead wires darkens part of the artwork while the overhead structures cast another shadow that has the effect of the light forming a makeshift spotlight on this particular piece. The light is cast in such a way that the viewer can also see a hint of past graffiti pieces whose edges can be seen in layers behind the main work. This, in addition to the surrounding markings, suggests that this is a space frequented by many artists whose interventions may be seen only fleetingly by the passengers of speeding trains, other graffiti writers, or by the intrepid urban explorer. In Figure 7, tags are visible through green mesh hanging down from scaffolding and cordoning off a construction zone on a street in Stavanger on the west coast of Norway. This soft obstruction is in contrast to the rigid fences and barriers in Figure 6. This loosely woven diaphanous green material casts a soft hue over the scene it only partially obscures. A form of (literally) soft security, this synthetic material impedes passage and prevents construction dust and debris from escaping. It also visually softens the tags – often negatively portrayed in public and political discourse - and the composition hints at the potential for a harmonious co-existence between different materials and aesthetics in the city.



FIGURE 6 Layers and lines of obstruction along the railway tracks, Oslo (2014)



FIGURE 7 Tags seen through green construction mesh, Stavanger (2017)

3.3 | Composition 3. Abstraction

The image in Figure 8 was taken by the legal graffiti wall at Gamlebyen Skatepark in Oslo. This photograph is not representational, and the viewer may struggle initially to identify its contents. Looking attentively, the viewer may recognise the shape of a cross-link fence and may sense that the blurred colours beyond belong to graffiti, although this is not necessarily obvious. It is the caption then that is most revealing here. Again, this photograph makes reference to obstruction. Legal graffiti walls are one of the few places where graffiti writers can paint without fear of reprimand, though these spaces are also a form of spatial control (Bloch, 2016). The fence here does not suggest a "keeping out" as the fences in the preceding image do but rather a "keeping in." Legal walls are often feared because of assumptions that graffiti will spread out from them like a contagion, infecting surrounding areas with tags and other aesthetic violations. This is a highly spurious assumption, however, and it may be just the opposite: that people value these spaces and so do not jeopardise the sites by tagging too closely in the vicinity. The image in Figure 9 suggests how light, or the absence of light, too can contribute to obstruction and abstraction. Here we see a large part of the image cast in a dark shadow making it difficult to discern what is written. This image may also hint at the conditions of writing graffiti, given that many of these tags were likely created in the evening or in low light. The strong triangular shadow in Figure 9 abstracts much of the graffiti in this space. The inability to read the letters in this darkened area is symbolic of how tags may be difficult for viewers to read or understand, potentially one reason why tagging has been especially maligned. The



FIGURE 8 Looking at legal graffiti from behind a fence, Oslo (2017)



FIGURE 9 Tags in triangular shadow, Oslo (2017)

three triangular spaces made by light and shadow recall the composition of abstract paintings, whose departure from figurative expressions have confused and angered viewers in similar ways that the public and authorities have responded to tagging.

3.4 | Composition 4. Reflection

The scenes in Figures 10–12 suggest something else about the conditions of viewing and how we look at the city. We are often in motion as we view the city and our ways of looking are affected by our positionalities and mobilities, infrastructure, and urban design. The materials that surround us ultimately mediate and affect our views in the modern city. This includes ubiquitous surfaces like glass that reflect back our surroundings while also allowing us to look through them. This view may be from inside public transportation or through the windows of buildings out onto the city. Figure 10 shows an image of rooftop graffiti. Graffiti pieces such as these on the top edges of buildings are quite common in Oslo and are visible from the street level below. However, it can be challenging to photograph these works. Their height and distance from the camera make it difficult to take a photograph from street level that is not awkwardly looking upwards. This photograph is interesting because it shows layers of architecture: a close-up view of a building on one side of the street whose window is reflecting back the rooftop of another building. The letters of the graffiti piece are reversed in this reflection, making them difficult to read and instead present as more abstract and artistic forms. The abstraction of these letters through reflection obfuscates their meanings even further for



FIGURE 10 Rooftop graffiti reflected and reversed, Oslo (2017)

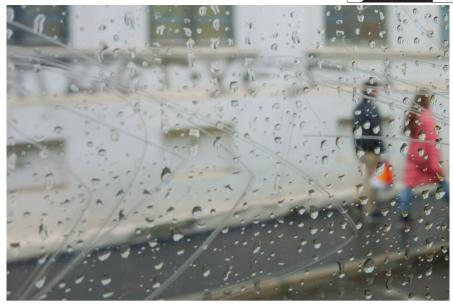


FIGURE 11 Looking through raindrops and etched graffiti on the 17 tram, Oslo (2017)

viewers who may already find the letters of graffiti confusing and alienating. Graffiti appearing in more abstract, colourful shapes may be more palatable, playful, and colourful interjections into the otherwise grey and muted construction palette of cities. These abstractions may separate what we are seeing from their politics, perhaps only momentarily. Images like this gently hint at the idea of how we view the city and that we can view it differently, from different perspectives. Similarly, the image in Figure 11 is also about the conditions of viewing. The etched graffiti and the raindrops on the window of a tram intervene and interrupt the viewing of graffiti on an exterior wall of a building. This image is non-representational as nether the graffiti on the tram nor the graffiti on the street are in clear focus. The atmospheric nature of the photograph also suggests how weather too can influence aesthetic experience. In Figure 12, a window both reflects back the city and offers a view into an empty commercial space under renovation. A stylistic chrome tag on the window by el mado prevents the passage of light, casting a shadow replica on the floor of the otherwise desolate space. The impermanence of the shadow evokes the ephemerality of graffiti, as its visibility is conditional on the light and position of the viewer and whose form also transmutes over time.



FIGURE 12 El mado on glass casts a shadow, Stavanger (2015)



FIGURE 13 Graffiti removal along a wall, Oslo (2016)

3.5 | Composition 5. Negation

Originally seeking to photograph what was present in the city, photographing what was absent also became a significant pursuit. Graffiti removal is the attempted erasure of graffiti from urban space using a variety of techniques. Graffiti removal or buffing are part of urban strategies that consider graffiti a problem that should be erased from the city (Arnold, 2019b). Efforts to eradicate graffiti are frequently founded on aesthetic judgements that graffiti is ugly, on moral judgements that it is a sign of disorder, and on the economic arguments that it is damaging to property and costly to remove. In the strictest policy regimes, graffiti is seen as disrupting the social order of the city. Graffiti removal is rarely completely effective and often leaves some trace behind. I was drawn to these echoes, influenced by my readings on graffiti-removal strategies in Oslo. These "negated spaces" (Arnold, 2019b, pp. 153–6) are a dominant aesthetic of the zero tolerance city and appear in different formations. The traces left behind can be understood in different ways. What remains is a visual and political reminder that graffiti is unwanted and not tolerated. It is a signal that further interventions will also be effaced. The remnants can also be viewed as unintentional artistic expressions and can be considered apart from their politics (see McCormick, 2001). Subtle forms, such as those in Figure 13 raise the important question of how absence can be photographed. In the case of graffiti, even in removal, something is created, and thus something can be photographed, even if it is only a trace.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

How does graffiti exist in the zero tolerance city? The answer to this question is multifaceted (see also Arnold, 2019a, 2019b). Graffiti is present in a city with anti-graffiti policy. Though this presence is contested, expressions exist and persist. However, their forms and qualities change, and their relationship with surrounding space is also implicated (for more insight into these changes, see Arnold, 2019b). Photographic documentation demonstrates what graffiti is present, in what forms, and where. This record is significant in a study on the impacts of zero tolerance for it confirms its failure as a policy for eradicating graffiti. Photography can also contribute to deeper understandings of the contested nature of graffiti. Images that move beyond documentation can evoke understandings of the territoriality of illegal urban art. Images that abstract can soften or nuance graffiti, pointing to the potential for a harmonious co-existence alongside other features and expressions in the city. This softening is particularly important for the practice of tagging, which is often policed most harshly. Playing with reflection offers similar opportunities, proffering visual metaphors that suggest different ways of looking at and re-imagining often misunderstood markings in the city. Photographing what is absent, in this case the removal or negation of graffiti, is as important as capturing what is present. Pulled in by the abstract traces left behind in graffiti removal and repeatedly encountering the ghosts of graffiti was one of the most significant aspects of this study. Drawn in by their aesthetics, the faint markings of painted over graffiti reveal the often fraught relationship between graffiti writers and authorities and the disputed place of graffiti in the city. This aesthetic dialectic – the push and pull or paint and erase – can also be read as visual evidence of the friction or agonism that Iveson (2016) suggests is necessary for a democratic city. This is one of the most powerful examples of the aesthetic politics of graffiti that was revealed through my artistic approach to photographic urban research. Making sense of these obstructions, abstractions,

reflections, and negations came after images were taken. These shifts in composition result from moving from passively documenting scenes to supplement text that is already written to actively making images as part of a hybrid geographic and artistic study. This shift may also have technical dimensions as photographers may experiment with different lenses, focus, light, and the exposure of images. These processes result in photographs that document, but that also go beyond simply illustrating something within a text. This is because the making of images precedes the existence of the text when the creation of images is a foundational part of methodology. In these ways, photography becomes experiential and relational, reflecting the researcher and becoming part of the analytical process. Singular images may reveal something specific and significant, although not every image created necessarily imparts a lesson or answers a research question. Analytic insight may also build through the cumulative experience of taking many images and the patterns that may subsequently emerge.

More than a change in how elements are arranged visually and aesthetically within a frame, changing how images are composed indicates an important, often spontaneous and intuitive, step in analysis. Composition shifts are thus a reflection of the analytic process, an embodied and affective response to what is observed in the field. This visual inference may happen long before a textual or verbal understanding is known or able to be fully articulated. While the shifts in composition discussed in this paper relate to my specific research questions on the politics of graffiti, the compositions presented here may have relevance for other photographic studies in the city or elsewhere. The urban photographer may find themselves asking similar questions that reach beyond a desire to document or record. What unexpected features are intruding the frame of images? What aspects are obstructed or abstracted? What is absent or erased in the framings? What is the significance of these intrusions and obstructions, abstractions, and negations? We might also want to consider addition as another composition. What new sights are drawing the eye of the photographer? The "what" in these questions could easily be expanded to the "who" for photographers capturing images of people. Carefully examining how compositions shift during the course of a photographic study – particularly one that is longitudinal – is an integral part of meaningful visual inquiry and fundamental to answering one's research questions. Diverging from documentary to more interpretative photography has its benefits. Rather than snapping a shot as an attempt to "objectively" capture a scene to support text, artistic approaches to photography involve creating images before the text. This move from taking to making photographs positions geographers as both scientist and artist. A single photograph can occupy multiple positions. It can simultaneously be insightful evidence made in the course of urban research and be an evocative work of art open to interpretation with all the possibilities and imagination that come with that designation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the editors and reviewers for their insight and positive critiques. Thank you to Majda Šodan for her assistance in copy-editing. Special thanks to Harriet Hawkins and Kurt Iveson for inspiring this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ORCID

Emma Arnold https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1117-7410

REFERENCES

Andron, S. (2016) Interviewing walls: Towards a method of reading hybrid surface inscriptions. In: K. Avramidis & M. Tsilimpounidi (Eds.), *Graffiti* and street art: Reading, writing and representing the city. pp. 71–88. London, UK: Routledge.

Andron, S. (2018) The right to the city is the right to the surface: A case for a surface commons (in 8 arguments, 34 images and some legal provisions). In: A. M. Brighenti & M. Kärrholm (Eds.), *Urban walls: Political and cultural meanings of vertical structures and surfaces*. pp. 191–214. London, UK: Routledge.

Arnold, E. (2019a) Aesthetic practices of psychogeography and photography. *Geography Compass*, 13(2), e12419. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12419 Arnold, E. (2019b) Aesthetics of zero tolerance. *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action*, 23(2), 143–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604 813.2019.1615758

Barthes, R. (2010) Camera lucida: Reflections on photography (R. Howard, Trans.; Reprint edition). New York, NY: Hill & Wang.

Benjamin, W. (1972) A short history of photography. Screen, 13(1), 5-26. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5

Berger, J. (2011) About looking. New York, NY: Vintage.

Bloch, S. (2016) Challenging the defense of graffiti, in defense of graffiti. In: Ross, J.I. (Ed.) *Routledge handbook of graffiti and street art*. London, UK: Routledge, pp. 440–451. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315761664-48

Bloch, S. (2018) Place-based elicitation: Interviewing graffiti writers at the scene of the crime. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 47(2), 171–198. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241616639640



- Crang, M. (2010) Visual methods and methodologies. In: D. DeLyser S. Herbert S. Aitken M. Crang & L. McDowell (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of qualitative geography. London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 208–224. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021090.n14
- Cresswell, T. (1992) The crucial 'where' of graffiti: A geographical analysis of reactions to graffiti in New York. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 10(3), 329–344. https://doi.org/10.1068/d100329
- Hansen, S. & Flynn, D.A. (2015) Longitudinal photo-documentation: Recording living walls. Street Art & Urban Creativity Journal, 1(1), 26–31.
- Hawker, R. (2013) Repopulating the street: Contemporary photography and urban experience. History of Photography, 37(3), 341–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2013.798521
- Hawkins, H. (2010) Turn your trash into... rubbish, art and politics. Richard Wentworth's geographical imagination. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11(8), 805–827. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2010.522719
- Hawkins, H. (2011) Dialogues and doings: Sketching the relationships between geography and art. *Geography Compass*, 5(7), 464–478. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2011.00429.x
- Hawkins, H. (2015) Creative geographic methods: Knowing, representing, intervening. On composing place and page. *Cultural Geographies*, 22(2), 247–268, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474015569995
- Honig, C.D.F. & MacDowall, L. (2017) Spatio-temporal mapping of street art using Instagram. First Monday, 22(3), n.p. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i3.7072
- Hunt, M. (2014) Urban photography/cultural geography: Spaces, objects, events. *Geography Compass*, 8(3), 151–168. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12120
- Hunt, M. (2016) A politics of the urban ordinary: The material ad hoc-ness of shops in London. *GeoHumanities*, 2(1), 255–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1158043
- Iveson, K. (2009) War is over (if you want it): Rethinking the graffiti problem. Australian Planner, 46(4), 24–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/07293 682.2009.10753419
- Iveson, K. (2016) Graffiti, street art and the democratic city. In: K. Avramidis & M. Tsilimpounidi (Eds.), *Graffiti and street art: Reading, writing and representing the city*. pp. 95–104. London, UK: Routledge.
- Kramer, R. (2010) Moral panics and urban growth machines: Official reactions to graffiti in New York City, 1990–2005. *Qualitative Sociology*, 33(3), 297–311. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-010-9154-0
- Latham, A. & McCormack, D.P. (2009) Thinking with images in non-representational cities: Vignettes from Berlin. *Area*, 41(3), 252–262. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2008.00868.x
- MacDowall, L.J. & de Souza, P. (2017) 'I'd Double Tap That!!': Street art, graffiti, and Instagram research. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717703793
- Madge, C. (2014) On the creative (re)turn to geography: Poetry, politics and passion. *Area*, 46(2), 178–185. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12097 McCormick, M. (2001) *The subconscious art of graffiti removal* [Film].
- Nordström, P. (2017) Glass architecture as a site for encountering the surface aesthetics of urban photography. *Space and Culture*, 20(3), 271–286. https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331217707475
- Rose, G. (2006) Visual methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials. London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Schwartz, J.M., & Ryan, J.R. (Eds.) (2003) Picturing place: Photography and the geographical imagination. London, UK: I.B.Tauris.
- Shobe, H. & Banis, D. (2014) Zero graffiti for a beautiful city: The cultural politics of urban space in San Francisco. *Urban Geography*, 35(4), 586–607. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2014.900961
- Shobe, H. & Conklin, T. (2018) Geographies of graffiti abatement: Zero tolerance in Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle. *The Professional Geographer*, 70(4), 624–632. https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2018.1443476
- Snyder, G.J. (2009) Graffiti lives: Beyond the tag in New York's urban underground. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Sontag, S. (1979) On photography (New e. edition). London, UK: Penguin Random House UK.
- Tormey, J. (2012) Cities and photography. London, UK: Routledge.
- Young, A. (2010) Negotiated consent or zero tolerance? Responding to graffiti and street art in Melbourne. City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action, 14(1–2), 99–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810903525215
- Young, A. (2014) Street art, public city: Law, crime and the urban imagination. London, UK: Routledge.

How to cite this article: Arnold, E. (2021) Photography, composition, and the ephemeral city. *Area*, 00, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12725