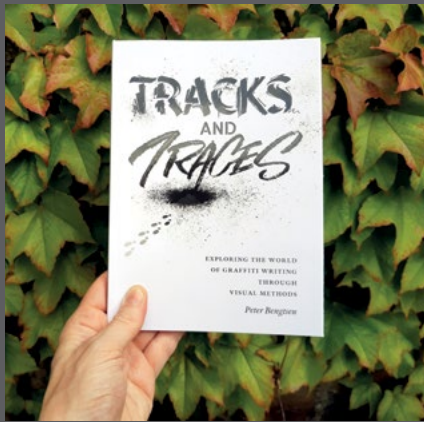


Tracks and Traces: Exploring the World of Graffiti Writing through Visual Methods (Beungtssen, 2023)



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Graffiti is an exciting transdisciplinary research field that begs for a multiplicity of approaches and methodologies. Aesthetic, legal, criminological, semiotic, and political ecological takes on graffiti – to mention a few – call indeed for as many dedicated research methods. Yet graffiti research methodology does not usually feature prominently in the literature, as confirmed even by a cursory look at recent reference works in the area, such as the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross, or *Graffiti and Street Art. Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, edited by Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi. Within this framework, Peter Bengtsen, himself an established graffiti scholar, has found a gap to fill with his new book *Tracks and Traces*. The aim of his book is precisely to develop visual methods to research urban graffiti and street art. The visual lens here provides both a theoretical prism through which graffiti can be conceptualised as well as a practical tool to attend to graffiti in context.

Social scientists using visual methods are determined to make the most of the visualisable details of social life, in a way that necessarily spans beyond the documentarian and becomes fully reflexive. Such a requirement ramifies into the many lives of images inside and beyond the street, now including those on social media with their intense circulation of shareable pictures, video clips, comments, etc. As Bengtsen shows, visual materials turn out to be inextricably enmeshed with ethical and even legal considerations, attesting to the fact that the public domain is always a sensible terrain, where heated reactions and unintended consequences easily ensue. Another important stance brought forward by the author shares similarities with the anthropology of material culture: in both cases, the visual materials are employed to glean hints of social practices and milieus we do not have direct access to. Not having access to the practice is, notably, not the same as not having access to its sites: in other words, there's a lot in taking pictures of graffiti that resembles painting



A still from the video *Tracing KEGR* (2019) by ©Peter Bengtsen.

graffiti, including trespassing into train yards, climbing walls, and reaching what are sometimes acrobatic spots. This embodied intimacy with graffiti is valuable to the researcher even in the absence of direct contact with the practitioners' community.

The visual therefore has more meanings than those associated with what we might call an 'evidential gaze'. Certainly, the social scientist is bound to remain, at least partly, a practising semiotician, an investigator akin to a detective working on a case to be cracked, as David Frisby beautifully elaborated. Still, the visual materials to be examined also constitute occasions to build connections and rapport in the field, given their capacity to elicit affective reactions and associate people around matters of shared concern. In other words, these pictures are more than just artefacts – or, to put it differently, they seem to possess some sort of agency of their own (as Tom Mitchell suggested, they might *want* something). An additional component that comes into play in the book

is time: the author presents his own experimental 26-minute video, *Tracing KEGR*, illustrating a hunt for tags by the Danish graffiti writer KEGR on the outskirts of Malmö, Sweden. With *Tracing KEGR*, Bengtssen deploys an overlaying technique for enhancing the visibility of tags and their relation to the urban environments where they are emplaced.

It is, however, not only the tag that is the object here, but the search itself, its temporality, and uncertain outcome – gesturing towards a mode of inhabiting the urban environment and possibly also towards the mode that subtended the writer's own action in the first place. A lot of interesting insights also derive from the reactions to the video posted on YouTube, revealing how most viewers expect videos of graffiti to be fast-paced, highly dynamic, entertaining, and over-the-top, even while the actual practice can feel quite different (a graffiti writer is first of all a relentless walker). To continue the topic of the search and its peculiar temporality, the author then produced another experiment, which the book reports in its last chapter: a printed zine based on *Tracing KEGR* (yes, paper zines are still fashionable well into the internet age) has been produced and used by the author to organise several scavenger hunts for copies of the zine conveniently hidden in the city's folds, tipping Instagram followers with apposite clues to the search sites.

In the final few pages, Bengtssen considers the impact new technologies such as drones and artificial intelligence might have in affecting or even disrupting the practice of graffiti, its circulation, and reception: drones give more chances for producing scenic documentation of graffiti in the making, but they also give more surveillance tools to the police and security agencies; and when it comes to AI, it might be used as a creative tool, but it might also disrupt the established hierarchies inside the graffer community, producing endless simulacra of inexistent (and often cheap) graffiti. Neatly produced by the independent press the author himself has launched, *Tracks and Traces* offers, in conclusion, an interesting and valuable resource for continuing the discussion of tags, graffiti, and the urban visual arts more generally.

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He is the founder and editor of the independent online web journal *lo Squaderno* (www.losquaderno.net) and the book series *Terrae-X*.

Bengtssen, P. (2023) *Tracks and Traces. Exploring the World of Graffiti Writing through Visual Methods*. Lund: Almendros de Granada Press.

Bengtssen, P. (2019) *Tracing KEGR*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-l6hcui_g.

