

## BOOK REVIEW

**Copyright in the Street: An Oral History of Creative Processes in Street Art and Graffiti Subcultures**, by Enrico Bonadio, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 174pp (PB), £29.99, ISBN: 978-1-009-19863-9.

You will never see street art quite the same way after reading Enrico Bonadio's latest book. Part legal text, part ethnographic and sociological study, the author allows us to accompany him as immediate witnesses of a secret world that might seem arcane to the uninitiated. After over a decade of work, nearly a hundred interviews and hundreds of hours of direct observation across the globe, Bonadio presents his case regarding how copyright laws are perceived within the street art and graffiti subcultures. Drawing from what could be called a legal realist tradition, the author veers away from legal biases and blinders that might arise with this particular subject matter, by helping readers navigate a habitat that might not be their own.

Structured in six separate chapters, including a foreword by Boston University's Jessica Silbey and an epilogue by City University of New York's Gregory Snyder, each chapter is distinct in its approach to the book's recurring *leitmotiv*: the perceptions, experiences and opinions of the practitioners of these forms of art. It is, undoubtedly, its introductory chapter (Ch.1) where we can first find Bonadio as Enrico, a young kid from Pisa, Italy, that in 1989, at that moment still unbeknownst to him, attends an event that will forever change his life: Keith Haring painting *Tuttomondo*. From that moment on, Bonadio will take us through a *tour de force* in which we will learn that graffiti and street art are not the same, even though it might be hard to know where to draw the line, as explained in Ch.2, "Creativity and Originality of Graffiti Lettering", and that those who do graffiti prefer to be called *writers*, because that is what they do: writing.

In Ch.3, "Copyright within Street Art and Graffiti Circles", on the other hand, we are greeted with Banksy's renowned statement that "copyright is for losers". It will not be long before the author showcases that this is not a statement shared by other street artists, not even by Banksy himself many years after he expressed it. Indeed,

copyright awareness has steadily grown in the street art subculture, as well as the idea that copyright is something that can be controlled and that helps regain control of one's own creation. In this instance, the author poses one of the fundamental questions that might arise for those who are not experts in this field: the issue regarding the illegality as the basis of this form of art. Lady Pink, the Ecuadorian-American street artist, presents an analogy worthy of a criminal law class: What would happen if a burglar hurts himself while robbing a house and then attempts to sue the home-owner? In this case, street artists seem to know more about the law than some lawyers.

Following that line of thought, in Ch.4, "Feelings about Attribution and Preservation", Bonadio delves into the temporariness and fleetingness of street art, and the question of decontextualisation and economic exploitation. While the differences between the justifications for copyright between common law and civil law jurisdictions would probably elude street artists, their reactions definitely prove that the debate on moral rights is not one in which they do not engage.

Furthermore, it is in Ch.5, "The Subcultures between an Anti-Establishment Ethos and the Mainstream", where we can enjoy the diverse range of views of street artists regarding whether the use by them of the tools of intellectual property law is hypocritical or not. The street art subculture has been historically linked to an anti-establishment, anti-government and anti-capitalist view of the world, a counter-cultural and subversive movement that denounces consumerism and capitalism. Would a street artist lose *street cred* if they were commissioned to paint for the golden arches' burger joint? What is the view that these practitioners have about using copyright to protect their works? Some of them view those who walk that path as sellouts that have betrayed their colleagues, while others just see it as playing by the rules of the system and using those tools to keep the message alive. In the middle, a myriad of opinions that further the idea that there is disagreement, but at the same time there is interest among them in the discussion.

The author dedicates the last chapter, Ch.6, to "Sharing, *Biting* and Social Norms", where we are treated with further explanations of some of the jargon that appeared throughout the book, such as "be original", "keep it real", "don't bite", "don't go over", "flow", "toys", "bombing", "hit", "burners", "tags", "throw-ups", and "buffing", among many others. Bonadio showcased earlier that copyright is something of which street artists are aware. However, do they use it? And the answer varies depending on who might be on the other side of the street. Whether it is a big corporation with deep pockets or another street artist just developing their trade. Not taking legal action between street artists, then, seems to be the social norm followed by the majority of the interviewees.

Street art is created and displayed in public spaces. At least, that is the original intention behind the works done by this movement. One of the definitions of graffiti is "making letters dance". Bonadio makes his written words dance in front of us, becoming the perfect tour guide to

a world that we probably only glimpsed before. As I already said, you will never see street art quite the same way after reading this book. I know I won't.

**Ernesto Edwards**  
*Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna*