

# BOOK REVIEW

## Instafame

MacDowall, L. (2019). *Instafame: Graffiti and Street Art in the Instagram Era*. Intellect, The University of Chicago Press. 200 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78320-983-5

*Review by Michael Saar, Lamar University*

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**I***nstafame: Graffiti and Street Art in the Instagram Era* by Lachlan MacDowall examines the production, display and promotion of the two art forms on the popular social media platform. Beginning with a simple comparison of the visual similarities between a tagged train passing by and the experience of scrolling through one's Instagram feed, the author dissects the influence the social media platform has yielded on aesthetics and production. The central thesis of *Instafame* is that the social media platform is not merely a different container for these artists' works, but that it necessitates a fundamental shift in the conception, production and reception of graffiti and street art. MacDowall incorporates a wide range of perspectives to make this case, pulling from art history and theory, media studies and critical theory. While it may be a bit uneven in some areas, the overall work provides a valuable contribution to both media and art studies.

The text is loosely divided into three parts. The first, and by far the strongest, provides a detailed overview of the two art forms. Although significant differences exist between both forms, the author points out shared characteristics, including their ties to legal, historical, geographic and technological issues. The highlight of this section, and arguably the entire book, is the thorough analysis of how Instagram as a medium influences and shapes these artists and their work. For MacDowall, Instagram has

several characteristics that align with practices of street and graffiti artists: the foregrounding of historicity in the publication of images; the ability to situate the work geographically through tagging; and, conversely, the ease with which anonymity can be maintained.

Part two begins with a more thorough examination of Instagram itself. The author argues that of all the social media platforms, Instagram is the most closely aligned with the needs of the creators and consumers of these art forms. The section begins with a history of Instagram, tracing its development from a social check-in app to its emergence as the dominant “image publishing and editing” social media platform, following Facebook’s purchase of the property in 2012. MacDowall notes the changes in the production and display of graffiti and street art during this time. The artists’ use of Instagram is not merely the adaption of a new technological tool to expand their reach: rather, the platform itself acts as an active force on the art forms shaping its production and reception to such an extent that it constitutes a new era in the history of graffiti and street art. To illustrate this, the author turns to two sites of data analysis. The first is a macro-level examination of the top 100 graffiti and street art related accounts on Instagram utilizing public data culled from the platform and the second is a longitudinal analysis of a single site of graffiti production over a period of months. MacDowell attempts to bring a “critical approach” to data analysis to avoid reifying the neoliberal capitalist ideologies inherent in this practice. For MacDowall, this means taking a broader view of how the artists, works and audiences interact (rather than a comprehensive view) -- an admirable, if not entirely successful, enterprise.

Part three is a detailed description of each of the 100 accounts pulled in the previous section. It is unclear what the purpose of this section is in relation to the broader project. If it is an example of the “critical approach” to data analysis MacDowall is championing, it leaves the reader unsatisfied. Perhaps, in an effort to avoid digging too intrusively into the data, or perhaps due to the limits of access, the analysis of these accounts feel incomplete and cursory. The dataset was created manually on a single day by collecting the 100 accounts of artists and entities related to graffiti and street art with the most followers. This results in a mix of artists, curatorial accounts of disparate origins and vendors of products related to graffiti and street art production. The accounts

are comparatively analyzed through a variety of methods including number of followers and followed, posts, likes, comments and captions. However, there doesn't seem to be any strong or consistent conclusions drawn from this analysis. Additionally, it would have benefited from a more granular view, separating artists from non-artist accounts, for example, or analyzing the nature of an account's followers. This is done to some extent by looking at which artists are followed by other artists, but, as the author notes earlier in the book, there are a myriad of reasons for someone to follow accounts beyond admiration of an artist's work. This does not mean the project isn't worthwhile. The data collected is valuable and substantive, but the analysis appears rushed and lacking systematicity and rigor as presented. If a detailed analysis is not the intention here and instead this section is offered as an entryway for readers to discover these various graffiti and street art related accounts, it still feels incomplete. The overview lacks the usernames for most accounts and there is an inconsistency of coverage throughout the section, with some accounts having a lengthy discussion and others a very cursory overview.

Despite these shortcomings, *Instafame* provides a valuable examination of the symbiotic relationship between graffiti and street art and Instagram. Those conducting research in the creation of art in new media or the application of social media to other art forms will find this monograph well worth reading.