The Screen on the Street: Convergence and Agonic Coincidences between Graffiti and New Media Objects

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Abstract
This article examines how graffiti converges with the information society cultural practices. The unreadable, complex, designed typographies known to graffiti writers as tags are global visual codes. Graffiti artists are incorporating modes of production, and performing operations, distinctive to Internet's imaginary. They are creating cultural objects convergent with Lev Manovich's new media objects principles. Using the notions of the agonic and of digitalia, the essay analyses how this movement between online and offline practices is enacted. Through graffiti, information is aestheticized. Stencils, murals, and most of today's graffiti art forms can be seen as portraying the information culture aesthetics meticulously developed by Manovich. Graffiti inhabits digital media in an unconscious and agonic manner. In turn, it organizes space and turns street wall data and structure into a flâneur-user experience.

Keywords
graffiti, street art, digitalia, new media theory, convergence media, media studies, cultural studies

Resumen
Este artículo estudia cómo el grafito converge con las prácticas culturales de la sociedad de la información. Las firmas ilegibles, complejas, tipografías diseñadas, conocidas por los artistas del grafito como tags, son códigos visuales globales. Los artistas del grafito han incorporado modos de producción y operaciones propias del imaginario de Internet. Además, están creando objetos culturales que responden a los principios de los objetos de los nuevos medios según los discute Lev Manovich. Trabajando las nociones de lo agónico y desarrollando el concepto digitalia, el ensayo analiza cómo se representan las prácticas en y fuera de la red. Los estarcidos, murales, y la mayoría de las formas artísticas del grafito presentan una posibilidad para entender la estética de la cultura de la información meticulosamente desarrollada por Manovich. El grafito coincide y está dentro de los nuevos medios digitales de forma inconsciente.
1. On Graffiti, Convergence and the New Media

Objects: An Introduction

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense of perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature, but by historical circumstances as well.

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1973)

Zedz, Lear, Esco, Exor, Zori4 and others have invaded and are bombing² our cities’ streets and they have been doing so for a long time. Unreadable, complex, non-figurative signatures, designed typographies known as tags by graffiti writers³ are global visual codes that appear from New York to Barcelona, from London to São Paulo, from San Juan to Berlin. Traces that seem to be global visual codes are no longer constrained to a single culture, fashion or period (see figure). Graffiti, originally associated with Hip Hop and the spray-can-ghettoized image of nineteen eighties New York, is no longer what it used to be. Graffiti aesthetics have developed by incorporating diverse media, rather than exclusively consisting of signatures and the spray can. Graffiti is an art form inspired by typography with qualities such as mutability, flexibility and motion. To develop into the truly global cultural object it is today required the integration of a myriad of artistic practices (see figure 2). Opinions on the categories that define this movement vary, however, for the purpose of this study, I will subscribe to Zedz’s terms:

Graffiti is the word we use to describe the dynamically changing reality of painting/writing names onto (public) surfaces to get either the name, the style or a message across to a wider ranging public. The paint may be replaced by other media (such as stencil, collage or other techniques). The format of expression is a changing one. Some people choose to focus on a historical definition in which fresco or carve drawings (as found in primitive caves) are the first graffiti. Others might state that “spray-can-art” is the true graffiti. I like a broad definition in which the meaning of the word can change, so that the term graffiti can point to a dynamically changing phenomenon.⁴

This phenomenon is no longer restricted to the street scene. Graffiti artists are entering the Internet and performing distinctive imaginary operations. Likewise, graffiti has invaded art galleries, stores and advertising agencies. Graffiti artists have embraced principles of anonymity, freedom of expression, transgression of public space and collective action as essentials of their art. Their claims and postulates are similar to those experienced in Internet’s “Web 2.0” era. Almost every writer has embraced Internet or software programs and tools to expand his/her work. In fact, a considerable amount of writers currently work as graphic designers and digital artists. Not only are they bombing our cities’ streets, their tags⁵ have entered the information highway.

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1. Excerpt from a song by Hip Hop Mexican musical band Control Machete, recorded for the soundtrack of Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film *Amores Perros* (2000).
2. Bombing is the word used by graffiti artists to describe illegal rapid painting on a public space.
3. Graffiti artists are called writers. Unless otherwise specified, all future use of the term in this article should be interpreted in this sense. The style used in the creation of complex signatures is known as wild style. The tag name—an intricate combination of letters that represents the writer, or the iconic tag—is the group of letters or symbol that becomes his signature.
4. Zedz is a Dutch artist that has incorporated graffiti into sophisticated fields such as 3-D design, architectural objects and pieces. This subject was discussed during several conversations held with him. His web page http://www.zedz.org is an extremely illuminating example of how far this art movement has advanced.
5. The sense of the word tag here is twofold: referring both to graffiti tag and to the Web’s tag index system.
This study seeks to understand the dialectic between digital imagery and graffiti. Can a graffiti piece be a new media object as defined by Lev Manovich? What are the coextensions and aesthetic convergences existing between graffiti, the Internet and new media objects? How do the visual modes of the Internet and design software influence artists’ work? How are artists’ online and offline activities connected?

The article engages the field of information society and digital visual culture by looking at graffiti as part of the “outside” visual codes of contemporary society. The theoretical framework draws on the work of new media theorists Lev Manovich and Henry Jenkins. I will correlate the operation of graffiti with Manovich’s notions of the new media object. In addition, I will examine some issues posed by this typographic medium through Jenkins’ analysis of convergence culture.

For Manovich, “new media represents a convergence of two separate historical trajectories: computing and media technologies” while media becomes programmable (Manovich, 2001: 20-27). For Jenkins, “delivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems.” As Jenkins points out, “delivery technologies come and go all the time, but media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment system” (Jenkins, 2006:4). Nowadays, these cultural systems seem to have impacted the work of designers and artists. Moreover, our modes of perception are still experiencing changes which call for a more thorough examination. The analysis that follows examines the issues of whether convergence occurs in graffiti and whether, through graffiti, the principles of new media objects are also reshaping human mental processes and their cultural production.

In order to map out these considerations, I have been observing certain virtual environments, such as the Wooster Collective and Art Crimes. In addition, I address the work of local graffiti-scene artists, with which I had come in contact through Art Crimes and through the San Juan School of Fine Arts and the University of Puerto Rico. The essay takes off with a discussion of what I call digitalia, with which it then correlates to four other topics: space, artist discourse, aesthetics and technology in graffiti. I use the term digitalia to describe the communicative condition of the information society. Digitalia reflects the condition shared, in an unconscious agonic manner, by graffiti artists and digital media.

2. Digitalia and Understanding Graffiti as Typography, New Media Object and Art Movement

Art Crimes, Wooster Collective, Ekosystem, Flickr are some of the virtual settings where graffiti is distributed, discussed and showcased. During the last three years, numerous books have been published on the evolution of graffiti into 3-D design, architecture and interactive media. According to Siggi Schlee, author of Fadings: Graffiti to Design, Illustration and More, in 2005 Google reported 6.1 million search results for the word graffiti (Schlee: 2005). By the end of 2006, that number exceeded 37 million. The word tag was used by graffiti artists before today’s web tag indexing and classification of data. On July 21, 1971 the New York Times published an article entitled “Taki 183”

6. Other authors have used the term to refer to different concepts, unrelated to the one presented here. Since June 2006, I also use the term digitalia in my blog Cáscara as a category related to Digital Visual Culture.

7. See Art Crimes (http://www.artcrimes.org), Wooster Collective (http://www.woostercollective.org), Ekosystem (http://www.ekosystem.org), Flickr (http://www.flickr.com).
Spawns Pen Pals”, which noted the presence of a man’s signature all over New York City. The graffiti community began to designate their monochrome signatures, which later evolved into calligraphic stylistic traits, with the word tag, after Taki—or so the story goes. Tags are carefully selected combinations of letters, icons and/or figures used by writers as their signature: identities converted into images through typography, design and drawing (see figure 3). It seems clear that Esco or Zedz are tag names conscientiously chosen for aesthetic and photographic purposes. Tags represent more than a self-centered action, they are synoptic identities displayed to challenge images presented in public spaces, such as billboards and advertising. They are indexical signs of an evolving visual code. The graffiti tag, an apparent predecessor of today’s Web tag, configures distinctive elements from the convergence of different artistic practices.

Another instance of this crossover between graffiti and the Internet is Meeting of Styles®, an event imaginable only in today’s information society. Meeting of Styles, as described by Lear, is a traveling project held yearly and coordinated online, which brings together thousands of writers from all over the world to paint different cities across the globe. A graffiti piece is thus no longer an offline piece, an object of immediacy vanishing in the corner of a city wall. Thousands of graffiti pieces now share online conditions in different ways.

Manovich defines the new media object as follows:

A new media object may be a digital still, digital composite film, virtual 3-D environment, computer game, self-contained hypermedia DVD, hypermedia Web site, or the Web as a whole. The term thus fits with my aim of describing the general principles of new media that hold true across all media types, all forms of organization, and all scales. I also use object to emphasize that my concern is with the culture at large rather than with new media art alone. (Manovich: 2001:14)

Accordingly, we can argue that millions of graffiti digital prints have joined that new media category.

Furthermore, although I will only be discussing some of these principles here, it should be noted that Manovich points to five principles that define the new media object. They are: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding (Manovich: 2001). The evolution and integration of new media into graffiti have shown that these five principles apply to most of its forms and practices. In Manovich’s words, a “new media object consists of independent parts, each of which consists of smaller independent parts, an so on, down to the level of the smallest “atoms” — pixels, 3-D points or text characters. Therefore media becomes programmable.” (Manovich: 2001:27).

Graffiti language is anti-narrative, non-referential, modular and variable. Graffiti is also programmable, a principle it has in common with many other objects, likewise marked by the agonic conditions that distinguish the symbolic systems of our information society. I use the notion of agonic for the conditions and concerns related to the moment when a subject, performance, or environment experience -or perform- the closeness of death. Agony functions in many interesting ways within the information society imaginary, as well as in Hip Hop cultural practices, because of the violence and fragility involved in the redefinition of categories.

Many of these cultural forms, characterized by their ubiquity and by the limitlessness of their categories, have been addressed theoretically in works such as William Mitchell’s E-topia. Digitalia is a communicative condition evolving from the blurred boundaries of our new visual culture. It is a human mind operation materialized at a liminal site in a variety of images, performances, codes and actions mixed as aesthetic practices both online and offline. Throughout this communication process, a graffiti piece—as well as its structure, intention and forms—becomes a new media object. By means of social action and production, digitalia generates polycentric multicultural new media objects, most of which are performed and displayed either in online settings or in urban offline settings. All of them embody our new modes of perception. Dramatically transforming our modes of vision, digitalia thus emerges as a contemporary communicative condition of the information age.

8. See Meeting of Styles (http://www.meetingofstyles.com). For a sense of MOS 2006’s ambitious schedule, the following are some of the cities that received the graffiti writers: MOS 2006 EUROPE: 06-07 May, Zagreb (Croatia); 13-14 May, Saloniki (Greece); 26-28 May, Varna (Bulgaria); 02-04 June, Lodz (Poland); 09-11 June, Wiesbaden (Germany); 16-18 June, Lyon (France); 01-02 July, Winterthur (Switzerland); 07-09 July, Padova (Italy); 28-30 July, St. Petersburg (Russia); 18-20 August, Eindhoven (Netherlands); 25-27 August, Antwerp (Belgium).

9. Following his previous, and well known, book City of Bits (1995), in his later book, E-topia (2001), Mitchell develops an argument in favor of extending our definitions of architecture and urban design to encompass online places, as well as (physical) offline ones. For Mitchell, city-e-topias should have basic design principles of dematerialization, denationalization, mass customization, intelligent operation and soft transformation. My use of digitalia in this essay is geared at developing a concept that could operate as a communicative condition within this sort of urban landscape.
Graffiti is also typography, as many writers acknowledge. Lear explains that “graffiti is typography that has been designed to become an image.” Whether it’s written on a piece of paper, a designer’s sketch on a blackbook, or, more recently, designed on a computer screen, all are constitutive of the human experience of writing and designing. Modularity is part of graffiti’s typographic convention. A graffiti piece has a fractal structure and this is particularly obvious in tag names and in the painting of murals, because of the combination of tags and pieces. According to the German crew 123Klan, “style is the message is our philosophy and definition of graffiti, because the only message we want to share in our pieces is our style” (Shlee, 2005: 50). Almost all signatures are designed to be unintelligible. Despite their divergent definitions of graffiti and street art, writers emphasize typography as vital for the artist's evolution, process and technique. The cultural forms of our “technological perception” seem to have influenced the way we experience our world. Graffiti artists are creating cultural forms that respond to new media principles. What this suggests is that it is a divergent and convergent phenomenon.

Graffiti exemplifies and fits the new media attribute of making explicit the psychological processes involved in communication. Manovich discusses the externalized mental processes of hyperlinking in computers, of clicking a link, following it, choosing or moving from one side to the other on an informational surface like the screen. Interestingly, these traits are also intrinsic to graffiti forms and operations. Graffiti tagging is itself founded on such a process of externalization. Even when it is performed on a street wall, it enacts most new media principles. The street wall already possesses information, a history, offers a plethora of textures, colors and forms. Just as the ancient palimpsest, wall and streets are about memory and writing.

But graffiti tagging does not occur only through lettering, it is also iconicographic. Its aesthetics has been transformed and thoroughly influenced by “old media.” As Jenkins points out, “history teaches us that old media never dies—and they don’t even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content—the 8-track, the Beta tape” (Jenkins, 2006: 13). Ata Bozaci and Remy Burger, members of the Toast crew and cofounders of ATALIER, maintain that:

“Today the world of digital graphics and design cannot be imagined without the influences of the Writing Movement. Countless variations and combinations are now possible through the fundamental elements of design and graffiti that already exist (Shlee, 2005:67).

The styles from the eighties have changed into sophisticated graphic design, stencils, icons, tags and characters that appear to be influenced by those displayed on video games and computers. These pieces on the street and their continuation in online scenarios accomplish new media object principles in different ways and have come into the scene through digitalia.

3. The Screen on the Street: Graffiti’s Reshaping of the City, Space and Communication

The renowned English graffiti writer, Banksy, states that “a wall is just as good a place to publish as anywhere else.” Streets, abandoned urban settings, crowded commercial areas, have been occupied with myriad screens. Even inside the pockets of every passer-by, small mobile phone screens move across the city. The metaphor of graffiti as writing generates perception modes already analyzed in film and media theory. The concepts of mobilized gaze, railroad vision and machine perception, are examples of how our modes of perception have been influenced by our experiences of technology and media. The city is communication and has long been a significant part of humanity’s imaginary and its experience of technology. In his urban study, Great Streets, Allan Jacobs points out:

“Streets are more than public utilities, more than the equivalent of water lines and sewers and electric cables, which, interestingly enough, most often find their homes in streets; more than linear physical spaces that permit people and goods to get from here to there. These may be the primary or only reasons for a few public ways, toll roads, freeways, turnpikes, but only a very few […] Communication remains a major purpose of streets, along with unfettered public access to property, and these roles have received abundant attention, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Other roles have not. (Jacobs, 1993: 3).

Graffiti is fed through communication embodied in streets. Writers feel the urge to publish in the street because it entails

10. The work of graffiti writer Lear is centered on the process of graffiti writing, and his pieces and graphic designs embody his theoretical concerns about graffiti.
11. Siggi Schlee’s publication, Fadings, is in itself an extraordinary example of the dialectic between technology and graffiti. This book has an interactive CD-ROM entitled Fadeings digital. The metaphor of cinematic transition, the fade, is a way to portray how boundaries have been blurred between graffiti and new media objects. The communicative action that creates those fadings is what I call digitalia.
12. See Banksy’s profile interview in Design is Kinky (DIK), http://www.designiskinky.net/profiles/banksy.html
13. The works of theorists such as Paul Virilio and Anne Friedberg are also very useful to discuss how motion and technology have influenced our modes of perception.
instant active audiences, and because the street embodies its own particular information and knowledge. Throughout the last 150 years our experience of writing, of time and space has been considerably transformed. The railroad, electricity, cinema, television, cars, computers and software are part of the historical changes and influences that have brought about new ways of perception. Film theory, as Manovich discusses, is quite useful to understand new media endeavors. Cinema has always been the readable object of both the city and the technological experience of urban landscape. Anne Friedberg eloquently defines the changes regarding cinema, which we may now use to think through new media objects and graffiti:

To describe adequately the role of the cinema in postmodernity, one must detail the effects of two forms of proliferation: spatial (mass distribution and its flip side, mass reception) and temporal (reception—the metonymic aspect of mechanical reproduction). The mechanical (and now electronic) capacity to manipulate time and space—essential features of cinematic and televisual apparatuses—has produced an increasingly detemporalized subject. And at the same time, the ubiquity of those simulated experiences has fostered an increasingly derealized sense of presence and identity. Cinema and television become readable not just as symptoms of a “postmodern condition,” but as contributing causes. Seen in that context, descriptions of a centered, derealized, and detemporalized postmodern subject form a striking parallel to the subjective consequences of cinema and televisual spectatorship.4

Graffiti writers are subjects of the same postmodern condition. Furthermore, their objects are the consequence of the same communicative phenomenon. The simulated experiences of our visual culture, as well as the growing number of “causes” afforded by the diversity of technological apparatus available to us, feed the forms of graffiti. Zori4, a female graffiti writer, graphic designer and web designer explains:

Remember that all of us have been raised with PlayStation, extreme sports fashion, television and advertising. I’ll always have the need to bomb the street because my message there is massive. If I see something in the news that makes me angry, like all the political and social injustices that we’re used to watching on TV, I’ll go to paint the street. I can scream in the street and thousands of people trapped in the morning traffic jam will be receiving the message. That’s why graffiti is at a boom now and is the way it is. (Zori4, interview, November 21, 2006).5

Zori4’s message becomes a text message in a huge and congested city highway screen, and the form of the message is itself influenced by motion. In fact, the origins of graffiti are inseparable from movement because of its display on subway trains. The speed required in the writer for the production of an illegal piece, and the perceptive motion of a walking or driving audience, are metaphors for a pervasively moving society. Thus, it is also motion that defines the aesthetics of graffiti.

Artists with a variety of cultural backgrounds are connected through the city and through the Web. In graffiti, spatial and temporal boundaries have been diminished, in keeping with the fairy tale discourse of our information age. This is particularly relevant in light of the promotional quality that the Internet offers. As the editors of the Wooster Collective pointed out in an interview:

The most positive effect is that the internet allows the movement to be completely inclusive on a global level. The current street-art movement is a global phenomenon that is being fuelled largely by the internet. With the internet you now don’t have to live in New York, Paris, London, Barcelona, or São Paulo to get your work up and get noticed.6

The city seems to inhabit the Web and nurture graffiti. The Web’s architecture supports and encourages the multicultural aspects of new media graffiti. This is apparent in Manovich’s description of the Web:

The open nature of the Web as a medium (Web pages are computer files that can always be edited) means that Web sites never have to be complete; and they rarely are. They always grow. New links are continually added to what is already there. It is as easy to add new elements to the end of a list as it is to insert them anywhere in it. All this further contributes to the anti-narrative logic of the Web. If new elements are being added over time, the result is a collection, not a story. (Manovich, 2001:221).

Graffiti experience of the Web operates both within this new media object logic and as a multicultural aesthetic experience of the city. This is particularly evident in the Graffiti Archaeology7 project. In this website developed by Cassidy Curtis, the “archaeology” consists of collecting photos, taken on different dates, of graffiti pieces painted in specific urban settings. For instance, the wall of a tunnel in San Francisco has multiple photos taken as far back as 1949. These photos are displayed in chronological layers showing the viewer-user how that specific wall has been painted at different times. The website

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14. See Anne Friedberg, Cinema and the Postmodern Condition, in Linda Williams, ed., Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 61.
15. See Zori4’s work in Art Crimes, http://www.graffiti.org/zori4/index.html, and DevianArt, http://zorifour.deviantart.com/
16. See interview in http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php
17. See Graffiti Archaeology website, http://www.otherthings.com/grafarc/
represents graffiti in its multilayer experience (see figure 4). Graffiti Archaeology showcases graffiti art, but it also functions as a tool for new media historiography on the visual culture of urban landscapes. Here digitalia is the site of a paradox. While it turns offline practices into online practices, it stands at the liminal street in which what was intrinsically impermanent and unstable is relocated to a space where it is protected, even from the selection process proper to many computer operations. French writer Eko publishes a picture on his website showing the following text on a sticker: "The only purpose of this STICKER is to be shot and uploaded on my website" (see figure 5). At the moment when that picture was taken, digitalia operated, and it continues to operate whenever viewers read the sticker’s text, see the photo, and perceive the derealized sense of the Atlantic beach of Biarritz in the background. Manovich maintains:

Today, in accordance with the transcoding principle, these two computer forms migrate back into the culture at large, both literally and conceptually. A library, a museum—in fact, any large collection of cultural data—is replaced by a computer database. At the same time, a computer database becomes a new metaphor that we use to conceptualize individual and collective cultural memory, a collection of documents and other phenomena and experiences. Similarly, computer culture uses 3D navigable space to visualize any kind of data—molecules, historical records, files in a computer, the Internet as a whole, the semantics of human language... (Manovich, 2001: 214-215)

Neither our perceptions, nor our gaze, will be the same, because our memory is now molded by visual metadata. The city has become the scenario of multiple screens. Communication embodies the city and graffiti images are visual codes of collective memory. Digitalia becomes true when the city becomes a perceptive machine, as Chaz, from the crew The London Police, says: “The city is orderly, magical, intimidating, exciting and immense. A living machine, a feast for the senses.” The city’s skin is the surface where transcoding is performed.

4. The Writer and the Hacker: Political and Cultural Convergence between the Internet’s and Graffiti’s Philosophy

Wired Magazine is an interesting place to observe how convergence operates. Discussing The Matrix as transmedia storytelling, Henry Jenkins points to how a cultural product, such as The Matrix, is more than a film: it is entertainment for the age of media convergence and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006:95). Wired Magazine’s content and aesthetics also epitomize this phenomenon. The work of the Graffiti Research Lab was exhibited in Ars Electronica 2006. At the time, Wired Magazine published this note:

These days, there’s an R&D lab for everything—even graffiti. Backed by new media venture Eyebeam, the Graffiti Research Lab upgrades street art with a jolt of electricity. Drawing on their backgrounds in tech, artists Evan Roth and James Powderly experiment with magnets, LEDs, and conductive and magnetic paints. “Street artists are naturally hackers and inventors. They mod markers, make their own ink, and defeat sophisticated security systems,” Powderly says. “The GRL is just an extension of that tradition.”

18. Eko is a graffiti writer, administrator and founder of Ekosystem http://www.ekosystem.com, a well known European graffiti website.
19. Chaz, from the London Police interviewed in http://www.abluetchicken.com/page more_info?left nav artists&artist id = 11
20. Sonia Zjawinski, Wired Magazine, September 2006.
Graffiti traditions of anonymity, freedom of expression, transgression of public space, collective creativity and innovation are values also found in Pekka Himanen’s book *The Hacker Ethic*. Hackers’ creativity and enthusiastic attitude “may also be found in other spheres of life—among artists, artisans and the ‘information professionals’, from managers and engineers to media workers and designers, for example” (Himanen, 7: 2002). The writer, like the hacker, believes in collective knowledge and stands for public access to information. Both seek to transgress institutionalized forms of culture. Yet, Dan Witz, an old school New York graffiti artist, insists that:

Street art for me has always meant freedom from the artist’s game—galleries, the career machine, all that frustrating, soul-sucking, dissatisfying bullshit. Going out on a street mission is my unsupervised playtime—no responsibility, no expectations, no need to worry about the artwork’s life outside that moment. [. . .] I mean, it’s a pretty standard career transition. It’s not just that graffiti and street art are traditionally a younger person’s game, but also it’s hard work. It’s dangerous, and one needs to maintain a kind of precarious punk optimism to keep going back out there year after year.  

For Jenkins the transmedia effect unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2006:96). Similar phenomena occur with graffiti, fashion, advertising and the Internet. Peer to peer production of knowledge and freedom are key concepts shared by the professionals and artists of the information age. Writers are becoming more visible. Multinational companies have entered this transmedia continuum as they have come to realize that the discourse of graffiti and its aesthetics are commercially appealing. It is about pop culture, *it is on the scene*, and therefore it sells. Sony, Nissan, McDonalds, Coca Cola, IBM, among others, have included graffiti aesthetic and strategies into their advertising campaigns.  

Dan Witz points out:

Street art and graffiti has its roots in rebellion; it’s a medium for the disenfranchised. By nature it threatens the status quo. With the advent of the internet and cheap digital sampling technology, and with parallel developments in music and skater/low-brow culture, and then, with George Bush ramming his fascist agenda down the world’s throats…street artists are speaking up.

21. See [http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php)
22. See [http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20051205-5685.html](http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20051205-5685.html) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4567236.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4567236.stm), [http://edition.cnn.com/2001/TECH/industry/04/19/ibm.guerilla.idg/](http://edition.cnn.com/2001/TECH/industry/04/19/ibm.guerilla.idg/), [http://www.slate.com/id/2086789/](http://www.slate.com/id/2086789/)
23. See [http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php)
5. Aesthetics and Technology: Internet, Photoshop and the sophistication of aerosol

The embeddedness of art and technology that results in the improvement of techniques is nothing new. Historical examples abound: the invention of the paint tube that allowed the impressionists to paint outdoors or the development of acrylic paint by Mexican muralist artists. Technology has also been crucial to the evolution of Graffiti. It allows artists to do more things inexpensively, to expand and promote their work, and to perform and compound their techniques.

In what follows, I address three different yet interrelated technological aspects that converged to make graffiti into what it is today. They are design software, the Internet and the sophistication of aerosol. Graffiti has experienced two different boom periods, both due to technological advances and media takeover. The first took place during the eighties, coinciding with the origins of MTV, the music hits of Madonna and Michael Jackson, and films such as Style Wars (1983) and Beat Street (1984). Computer technology also grew rapidly during this period. The Internet, software design and the development, production and distribution of aerosol by writers themselves, unleashed the second boom. Montana spray paints employs a technology geared to achieving better lines and shapes. Designed specifically for graffiti, Montana spray cans are an example of how aerosol technology has sophisticated graffiti’s forms and techniques. The production and design of a work tool by the user, the writer, have important socio-economic and aesthetic consequences. The concept of the consumer (client) as the innovator is closely related to contemporary Internet practices and communication.

Digitalia operates when we move from, and towards, different imperceptible derealized places in a similar manner to that described by Pierre Lévy’s Möebius effect (Levy: 1995). Ubiquity alters perception and impacts on actions in various forms. Information age technology proves that this process is only, and apparently always, at an early stage. Zedz designs converted into 3-D architectural pieces and Banksy’s stencils are only a few of the interesting artistic proposals that facilitate an understanding of the convergence between aesthetics, graphic design practices and graffiti.

The ontology of the computer is projected literally, not only metaphorically, onto the creative process at large, onto culture. Manovich develops this idea:

“The computerization of culture involves the projection of these two fundamental parts of computer software—and of the computer’s unique ontology—onto the cultural sphere. If CD-ROMs and web databases are cultural manifestations of one half of this ontology—data structures—then computer games are manifestations of the second half—algorithms. (Manovich, 2001:223).

Writers use Photoshop and Illustrator as working tools for designing and preparing sketches, mostly for murals to be painted later. The almost total consensus concerning techniques and tools among graffiti writers is another example of the transcoding principle. The design system employed by graffiti crews stands in an interesting correlation to the modularity, variability and automation principles. Graffiti murals are interestingly modular (see figures 6 and 7). These objects can represent a graffiti piece as a new media object. Concerning variability and modularity Manovich stresses that

Variability would also not be possible without modularity. Stored digitally, rather than in a fixed medium, media elements maintain their separate identities and can be assembled into numerous sequences...
under program control. In addition, because the elements themselves
are broken into discrete samples (for instance, an image is represented
as an array of pixels), they can be created and customized on the fly.
(Manovich, 2001:36).

Zedz’s work is paradigmatic for the discussion of variability and
transcoding. His tagging precisely represents the open nature of the
Web and his designs overlap with many of Manovich’s concepts
regarding the new media logic (see figure 8 and 9). He has developed
architectural objects based on graffiti tagging that are placed in urban
spaces. Take, for example, his Project Zedzbeton (2.0):

Architecture Project Zedzbeton (2.0) project is the result of a
cooperation… [It] is a proposal for a “piece” of “city furniture” of about
40 meters length, 8 meters width and 4 meters height. The object resulted
from the extraction and modification of one Zedz’s first isometric 3D
designs” (Schlee, 2005: 44) (see figures 7 and 8).

In Zedz’s words:

I had an interest in building and constructing since childhood. The
awareness that typography is more than ink on a paper. The hunger for
experimenting against the boredom of copying and repeating behavior.
The coincidence that there was an architect looking for a graffiti writer
to collaborate with, at the same time that I was looking for an architect
to work with. (Interview: Zedz: 2006).

The ongoing dialectic between new media—offline and online
practices—and graffiti seems quite obvious. It again reveals itself
when considering stencil, iconographic tagging and other new
media forms of graffiti. Stencil, a very popular street art form, is also
illuminating to understand convergence. Its interest in approaching
the new media object arises from its implication with cinematic
and televisual aesthetics. Stencils are drawn from photos. They are
photographic image-designs worked on a computer, printed and cut
out. The stencil represents the moment of photographic agony, the
reference of digital media to old media. A stencil is an object of
digitalia: an indexical sign, metadata.

The work of Banksy is traveling the world through physical and
virtual space. His stencil pieces are a trademark around international
cities. These binary images are created to achieve silhouette forms:
to outline an image (see figure 10). Stencils are natural objects of
digitalia because they represent how artists communicate with “old”
media through different spaces and apparatus. It is interesting to
observe how Banksy executes this principle in urban space. The wall
is interactive (see figure 11). The flâneur/flâneuse is called to enter.
Manovich explains the concept of information culture:

The concept “information culture,” which is my term, can be thought
of as parallel to another familiar concept—visual culture. It includes the
ways in which information is presented in different cultural sites and
objects—road signs; displays in airports and train stations; television
on-screen menus; graphic layouts of television news; the layouts of

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24. Retrieved from Flickr http://www.flickr.com/photos/markjarmyn/148059278
25. See Banksy’s website: http://www.banksy.co.uk/
26. The use here of the concept of flâneur is based on Anne Friedberg’s essay “The mobilized and virtual gaze on Modernity” (2002). In Mirzoeff, N. (ed.). The Visual Culture Reader.
books, newspapers, and magazines; the interior designs of banks, hotels, and other commercial and leisure spaces; the interfaces of planes and cars; and last, but not least, the interfaces of computer operating systems (Windows, MacOS, Unix) and software applications (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Eudora, Navigator, RealPlayer, Filemaker, Photoshop, etc.). (Manovich, 200:3)

I would add to the above that graffiti is also one of the ways in which information is aestheticized. Graffiti inhabits digital media in an unconscious and agonic manner. In a sort of reversed process, graffiti organizes space and turns street wall data and structure into a flâneur-user experience. Graffiti’s techniques and tools are challenging the spatial and temporal boundaries that define offline physical space. Stencils are part of this transmedia condition. Manovich states that “over the course of twenty years, the culture has come full circle. If with GUI (graphical user interface) the physical environment migrated into the computer screen, now the conventions of GUI are migrating back into our physical reality.” (Manovich, 2001:13)

6. The Aesthetics of Tagging and Agony: Conclusions

If Photoshop toolbox operations are extensions of the artist’s (user’s) hand, every time this extension is executed, a manner of death and birth of that hand is implicated in the process (see figure 12). Motion, immediacy and agony are embodied in our experiences of computerized society and are inseparable from the centering of subjects and systems. Manovich stresses that:

If the World Wide Web and the original VRML are any indications, we are not moving any closer toward systematic space; instead, we are embracing aggregate space as a new norm, both metaphorically and literally. The space of the Web, in principle, cannot be thought of as a coherent totality: it is, rather, a collection of numerous files, hyperlinked but without any overall perspective to unite them. The same holds for...
actual 3-D spaces on the Internet. A 3-D scene as defined by a VRML file is a list of separate objects that may exist anywhere on the Internet, each created by a different person or a different program. (Manovich, 2001:257)

The identity crisis of information society, as Sherry Turkle discusses, arises from incoherent cultural systems. “Without any principle of coherence—Turkle affirms—the self spins off in all directions. Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate. Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to a point of immobility.” (Turkle, 1995: 258) Our identity, in the computer and the street, “is the sum of [our] distributed presence.” (Turkle, 1995: 13) Convergence media is shaped in graffiti. Zedz explains it in this way:

I sometimes use the same methods for designing and writing. Sometimes I take my work off the street into the computer or sometimes the other way around. This can be either in the literal form of appearance—the images look the same—or sometimes they respond to the same way of thinking or concept. Designs from outside the computer have got more character, a hand feel, an imperfect something in a touch...
(Zedz, personal communication, December 6, 2006)

As Jenkins points out, this is one of the ways in which convergence functions:

Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. (Jenkins, 2006: 4)

The visual codes and cut and paste operations embodied in our cultural systems reflect a considerable amount of uncertainty and incoherence: a perpetual and liminal agonic condition. Graffiti writers challenge that sense of uncertainty and agony in their very relationship with space. It is communicating in the present. Illegality, motion and urgency occupy an important place in the experience of both graffiti and the city. The incoherence of existence provokes urgency and agony: both are aestheticized within graffiti.

A kind of “vector influenced” motif, combined with the urgency and motion of city and Web experience, is inherent to many graffiti objects today. Graffiti tagging assuages agony through the artist’s experience with designing software. As Zori4 describes it: “when I am making my tag I have in the back of my head the vector’s perfection of my graphic designing” (Interview: Zori4: 2006). Indeed, artists’ identities and expressions are located at different borderlines and even within a single artist tension between technology and artistry bring about an agonic moment. Some artists will argue that technology weakens poetics. Others will push the limits of technological presence in the artistic act. An interesting example of this is the graffiti computer machine named Hektor (see figures 13 and 14), developed by Jürg Lehni and Uli Franke. Hektor is a portable wall-spraying machine, a programmed graffiti wall painter that works directly with Adobe Illustrator.
The idea behind Hektor was to create a tool with new and different aesthetics. It is intended as a reaction to a certain monoculture in design, caused by the use of computers and the same few applications and techniques—which are mostly based on vector graphics—that are used by the majority of designers all over the world… Hektor follows vector paths like the hand follows a line when drawing. Moreover, with the spray can, Hektor uses a tool that was made for humans. Combined with the fragility of the installation, this aspect gives the machine a less precise but somehow poetic quality. Ambiguous on purpose, Hektor unifies technological and imprecise qualities. (Mai, 2005: 98)

Thus, graffiti becomes programmable too. It can be included in Manovich’s claims for an “info-aesthetics—a theoretical analysis of the aesthetics of information access as well as the creation of new media objects, which ‘aestheticized’ information. In an age when all design has become ‘information design’, … information access is no longer just a key form of work, but also a new category of culture” (Manovich, 2001:217). The “poetic touch” that inhabits the streets is another example of humanity’s permanent need to challenge death. Agony is about death. Art becomes about challenging death.

Throughout this essay, I suggest that digitalia is the communication condition proper to that agony and frailty. Paradoxically, it is precisely those conditions that make graffiti an art form capable of abolishing boundaries. Graffiti artists embrace their work certain that they are defeating agony. Zedz is “sure that there are many things, surfaces, and ideas to be explored, all with their own boundaries which are about to be torn down by graffiti artists” (Schlee, 2006: 31).

Partly in response to city government repression of graffiti spaces and practices, beginning December 2006, Exor, a Puerto Rican graffiti writer produced a series of performances. His body tagged (bombed by audience and writers), was later displayed as a product. He explains this work saying that he sees graffiti as a public and private space and offers to bear on his body the graffiti exiled from city walls. Another of his performances, entitled Fragile, “consisted in packing my body as a fragile product. […] Nowadays graffiti is an apparently fragile concept. I tried to personify the identity crisis that academia and the mass media have generated in graffiti. The package also refers to the use of graffiti as a product” (see figures 5 and 6). By objectifying the process, the concept and the ideology, the artist constructs a derealized place which graffiti, as a new media object, inhabits. Digitalia operates organically throughout these performances. Exor, as a tag subject/object, was transporting the city and graffiti onto himself.

Graffiti’s visual codes are renewing all kinds of perception modes (see figure 17). The body, space, and the shape of information are beginning to outline an agony characterized by velocity: our existence and our identities in tags, screens, surfaces, as instant messaging. It would seem that our experience of human life is still to be tagged.

Figure 17. Our existence in tags. (Photo © Ignacio Bazzano).

28. Exor and Lear’s interviews have been crucial to the development of this article. Both artists are consistently working in workshops and forums about graffiti. Their intellectual and artistic concerns have moved beyond their creative practices and techniques.
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