

Graffiti Beyond Territories: Rethinking Space Materiality Through Digital and Graffiti

Quenson Adélaïde

Chair of Digital Humanities, University of Geneva, 1205 Geneva, Switzerland; E-Mail: adelaide.quenson@etu.unige.ch
<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3866-6849>

Abstract

From New York's subway writers in the 1970s to today's global street artists, graffiti has long functioned as a form of spatial hacking. Yet if digital technology is said to have transformed graffiti, what exactly has changed? Which new forms of territorial engagement and representation emerge when graffiti intersects with digital tools?

This paper examines evolving relationships between graffiti, territory, and digital media, focusing on how technologies such as drones and social media reshape access to space, visibility, and memory. What occurs when ephemeral, site-specific practices meet persistent, shareable, and searchable infrastructures? How does the logic of tagging adapt – or resist – to the demands of algorithmic visibility?

Through a selected corpus of works, this paper identifies two key shifts in territorial engagement in the digital age. First, access to inaccessible spaces: drone footage, video documentation, and online sharing allow visibility beyond physical reach, exemplified by high-risk actions of crews like 1UP in Athens and Naples. Second, access to multiple temporalities: digital tools preserve or reactivate erased works, as in Blu's animated murals, Insa's 'GIF-iti,' or social media archives.

This paper contributes to a broader reflection on how graffiti continues to negotiate – and redraw – the boundaries of territory in an increasingly hybrid, digitized urban environment.

Keywords

Graffiti; street art; territory; digital media; social media; spatial hacking

1. Introduction

A small group of people walk along the coast until they reach a stranded ship. They inflate an air mattress to use it as a raft and gain access to the wreck. Once on board, they explore the ship and load painting equipment. As the sun sets, they begin to paint the side of the wreck. The following day, under bright sunlight, an even larger group gathers to paint the ship's side in a festive atmosphere. The viewpoint then shifts upward to an aerial perspective, revealing what the crew had been painting: a gigantic "1UP" in the middle of the sea. This description corresponds to the sequence of events in

the 2019 video *1UP – Mediterranean Sky – The Ship*¹ by the graffiti collective 1UP, founded in Berlin in 2003 and active worldwide.

1 - Mediterranean Sky - The Ship, Athens, 6 juillet 2019, 3:59 (en ligne : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p644XYSGheY> ; consulté le 19 mai 2024) the 1UP crew travelled to Athens/Greece, to paint an abandoned shipwreck called the «Mediterranean Sky».\nUsing air mattresses, they bring all the equipment on board and paint a roller-piece on the side of the ship.\n\n1UP on Instagram:\n / 1up_crew_official \n\n1UP on Youtube (Playlist

Almost 60 years earlier, a bunch of teenagers from deprived neighborhoods started writing their monikers on the walls of their block. Soon, the walls were not enough, and they used subway cars to circulate their graffiti. Graffiti writers used the mobility of subway cars to circulate their tags across the city, significantly expanding the visibility of their work. This strategy not only enhanced exposure but also enabled them to transcend the spatial and social boundaries of their local territories at minimal cost. This strategy can therefore be considered as an emblematic example of network hack², and one of the earliest ones: that of the New-York City subway at the end of the 1960s.

As the cultural hegemony³ of capitalism configures spatial practices through institutions and systems of representation⁴, confining these young people to their part of the city, graffiti appears as a practice that challenges this hegemonic conception of space. By reclaiming urban space, graffiti enacts a form of material and symbolic reappropriation that contests the established spatial order. It reveals the conflicts inherent to spatial dynamics and embodies a visual resistance that temporarily reconfigures both the physical experience of space and the gaze of its users.

Too often is the public space discussed through the lens of digital studies as a dematerialized space in which individuals can express themselves⁵ – an ethereal counterpart to the classical agora. However, the physical public space – streets, squares, public transportation, where people meet and bodies physically encounter one another – is rarely analyzed through the lens of its digital transformation. Indeed, the presence of screens is often

2 - Benjamin Gaulon in *Oxymores III, état de l'art urbain - TR 3 : L'art urbain à l'ère des réseaux numériques.*, Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, 9 décembre 2016, vol. 4/7, 1:57:16 (en ligne : <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x54sy9a> ; consulté le 6 mars 2022)

3 - See Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*

4 - H. Lefebvre, « La production de l'espace », *L'Homme et la société*, vol. 31, no 1, 1974, p. 15-32

5 - É. Bailly et D. Marchand, *Ville numérique. La qualité urbaine en question*, Wavre, Mardaga, 2021

the only standard for evaluating the digitalization of urban space. Only a few artists seem to be interested in those questions of the digital space encountering the urban space. It is therefore time to consider how digital technologies and the web have reshaped our relationship with the material world, how they have influenced our understanding of the urban space and how we move ourselves within it. Graffiti, as an intrinsically corporeal urban practice, offers a compelling example for such questioning.

While digital technology has not produced any major formal transformation in urban spaces⁶, it has introduced an ontological shift in the way of experiencing the city. Indeed, why persist in disrupting and hacking the urban spaces, which are supposed to be increasingly monitored and standardized?

Then, what happens when ephemeral, site-specific practices meet long-term, shareable, and searchable infrastructures? How does the logic of graffiti writing adapt to – or resist – algorithmic visibility?

In this article, I will examine the (sometimes only apparent) opposition between digital space and physical space, first through the way in which digital technology has changed our relationship with physical space in a logic of spectacularization⁷ and globalization accelerated by social networks; and secondly, the way in which digital technology blurs our relationship with time

6 - S. Wachter, « La ville numérique : quels enjeux pour demain ? », *Métropolitiques*, Métropolitiques, 28 novembre 2011 (en ligne : <https://metropolitiques.eu/La-ville-numerique-quels-enjeux.html> ; consulté le 30 juillet 2022)

7 - We'll understand *spectacularization* as a socio-cultural process through which events, practices, or discourses are reframed and amplified into spectacles, privileging visibility, drama, and affective impact over complexity or contextual depth. We use this term in relation to Guy Debord's (1967) notion of "the society of the spectacle," where mediated representations dominate lived experience and transform social relations into appearances for consumption.

by creating multiple temporalities, particularly through new ways of archiving.

2. Pirating the Public Space: How Digital Tools Disrupt Graffiti Boundaries

As they try to reach the wreck of the Mediterranean Sky ship, the members of 1UP crew really have to engage their body: they paddle with their arms, on an inflatable mattress, sometime half or completely naked although the weather seems cold given the anoraks some are wearing. Furthermore, they walk away from the city, approximately 30 kilometers away from Athens, crossing the Gulf of Elefsina. By choosing to paint in an area that is inaccessible, invisible from street level, and even entirely away from any urban environment, 1UP breaks out of the fundamental urban tradition of graffiti.

Graffiti is anchored in a tradition of defying space limitations. Originally, this challenge was meant to escape the neighborhood; it is now to access places never before reached. This desire to reach inaccessible locations is both induced, enabled and encouraged by the virality and visibility that social media promises. The competition amongst digital platforms, promoting constant differentiation and visibility among content creators, further accelerates this wrestle for ever more inaccessibility. It is enabled by digital tools that facilitate the systematic documentation and dissemination of these actions. In the case of *1UP – Mediterranean Sky – The Ship*, the spot is far away from the city and unreachable by foot; the work is not designed for physical spectatorship. Its full scale can only be appreciated from above. This requires drone footage to be fully captured. It is thus obviously produced with the intention to be watched on a screen, through a video, and shared. This is allowed by the increasing accessibility to digital tools. Civilian drones, for instance, have become more affordable and widespread starting from the 2010s. This technological democratization allows a new aesthetic in graffiti-related videos: highly produced, visually polished works that borrow from the stylistic codes of Hollywood blockbusters – featuring dynamic editing, lively ambient music, and multiple points of view. Consider,

for example, 1UP's *Graffiti Olympics*⁸ (also from 2018). The video features a series of interventions – such as painting an entire subway car, executing a throw-up on a building facade, and rappelling to create a mural. While each act is technically well-executed, the major impact lies in the way the video is filmed: entirely by drone, flying from one performance to the next, mimicking a bird's-eye perspective. The coordination and continuous movement create a cinematic, uninterrupted sequence that transforms these actions into a visually choreographed event.

Graffiti engages both the mind and the body of the writers in urban space, fundamentally changing their perception and experience of the city⁹. It generates a distinctive experience of the city by giving artists searching for the perfect spot an incentive to explore it. Graffiti also constructs a transgressive perspective on urban space by training the eye of those – whether artists or amateurs – who photograph the piece. In this sense, as Javier Abarca¹⁰ points out, graffiti resonates with Situationist theories in that it encourages subversive and playful behavior in urban spaces, particularly the notion of *dérive* developed by Guy Debord. Just as the random and playful journeys proposed by the Situationists, graffiti invites to a reappropriation of the city that escapes the utilitarian and functional logic imposed by capitalist urbanism. It thus encourages the adoption of subversive behaviors where wandering, searching for the spot, and visually appropriating space are acts of symbolic resistance to the established spatial order.

In the years 2010, French artist Mathieu Tremblin developed his *Tag Cloud* project¹¹. In this work centered

8 - Graffiti Olympics, Athens, 2 mars 2018, 4:22 (en ligne : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyjZ-zHzXNO> ; consulté le 28 septembre 2025)

9 - Cf. interview with Evan Roth, 30/05/2025.

10 - M. Tremblin, « Le graffiti comme carte psychogéographique », *Graffiti*, no 36, décembre 2011, p. 66-73

11 - M. Tremblin, « Tag Clouds “Colombier Optique” », sur *Demo de tous les jours*, 2010 (en ligne : <http://demodetouslesjours.free.fr/tag-clouds-colombier-optique/> ; consulté le 21 novembre 2024)

on the legibility of graffiti, Tremblin replaces graffiti tags with computer-generated typographies, converting these signatures into readable words—'tags' in the digital sense. Tremblin constructs an analogy between physical and digital tagging, tracing the paths graffiti writers take as they inscribe their marks on the city—an embodied process scaled to the movement of the human body through space. By rendering these tags legible, Mathieu Tremblin offers a form of urban 'deciphering'. As he notes in an interview: "[tagging] totally challenges your perception of architecture and the way you can walk through the city in everyday life¹²". It is this experience that he proposes to share by making tags legible, and therefore accessible. His approach consists of adopting the graffiti artist's perspective, constantly searching for the ideal *spot*: a location where the graffiti will be clearly visible once executed, yet discreet enough during its creation. The graffiti artist then ceases to be a mere passerby and becomes an explorer of the city, guided by a quest that is at once aesthetic and strategic. With the *Tag Cloud* project, Mathieu Tremblin extends this experience to the novice passerby, who is invited to recognize the tags, follow their traces, and thereby reconstruct a spatial and narrative logic within the urban space. In doing so, Tremblin makes tangible the performative and ephemeral dimension of graffiti. Ultimately, he merges the physical and digital spaces, and constructs a new territory common to both the digital and the bodily space¹³. With this act of translation, Tremblin juxtaposes the urban and the digital, allowing each domain to illuminate the other. Like graffiti writers, he reimagines the city as a space to be experienced and interpreted differently—yet he introduces an additional dimension: that of digital semiotics. For Tremblin, the concept of *Tag Cloud* emerged in the early 2000s, coinciding with the expansion of the access to the Internet, which provided graffiti writers new platforms to share their work—

12 - A. MacLean, « The artist turning graffiti tags into generic text », *Dazed*, 4 août 2016 (en ligne : <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32305/1/street-artist-mathieu-tremblin-turns-the-city-s-graffiti-tags-into-generic-text> ; consulté le 19 novembre 2024)

13 - S. Wachter, « La ville numérique », *op. cit.*

initially through personal websites and blogs, where tag clouds offered a prominent navigational tool.

Digital tools can also help defying space limitations. For instance, for people with disabilities, the city itself that can appear as inaccessible as the middle of the Gulf of Elefsina. In 2009-2010, the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL), an interdisciplinary and informal artistic research group, had paved the way to introducing new technologies next to the traditional spray cans in graffiti. They were looking to DIY new tools using cheap technologies while keeping the subversive spirit of graffiti. One of their most memorable projects, the *EyeWriter*¹⁴, was designed for Tempt1, a writer afflicted with ALS, a neurodegenerative disease that left him paralyzed in all four limbs. The *EyeWriter* tracks eye movements and translates them into digital sketches, which can then be projected onto walls—enabling Tempt1 to restart writing graffiti. This project was a way for Tempt1 to immaterially reclaim the streets.

Building on this concept, the GRL also experimented with luminous graffiti. Using a powerful projector and a laser pointer, users could 'draw' light-based graffiti on the building surfaces. Initially the ephemeral, non-destructive nature of these projections bothered them¹⁵, but seeing their name in a ten-story high size calmed down their discontent. This luminous graffiti technique allowed graffiti artists to leave marks, though fugitive only, on institutional cultural and iconic spaces traditionally inaccessible to graffiti, such as the Tate

14 - T. Watson, « EYEWITER », sur Theodore Watson - Interactive Installations, s. d. (en ligne : <https://theowatson.com/work/eyewriter> ; consulté le 23 novembre 2024)

15 - Cf. "They [the graffiti writers] would wrestle in their own minds about how they felt on that issue because on the one hand the non-destructive part felt really lame to them, felt kind of antithetical to the culture. But then seeing your name, ten stories tall like that was very much part of the culture and so well, there was moments like that, where it was like a little bit more complicated than just like destructive or non-destructive"; interview with Evan Roth, 30/05/2025.

Modern¹⁶, the MoMA or the Coliseum. One of the key factors that made this project possible is precisely the growing affordability of technologies. In a practice that flirts with legality – if not outright illegality – the incorporation of digital tools implies taking the risk of having to leaving them behind if comes the time to flee away¹⁷. Digital graffiti can therefore only emerge and develop when technological devices have become sufficiently affordable.

Technology expands the space within which graffiti is anchored, redefining both its practice and visibility. No longer confined to the urban fabric, it now renegotiates the frontiers between physical and digital terrains, extending its subversive potential while adapting to new cultural and technological conditions.

3. Layers Don't Lie: How Digital Graffiti Hacks the Urban Timeline

The MS Mediterranean Sky on which 1UP painted in 2019 was built in 1953. After more than 40 years of navigating on several seas, she was abandoned and sank in 2002. Choosing to paint on this shipwreck is a way to shed light on a boat abandoned for more than 15 years. It is a way to reveal how all those different episodes convert into one same moment: the time of Navigation, the time of Sinking, the time of Oblivion and ultimately the time she is brought back to light by 1UP's graffiti and video. It seems here that digital tools open the door to new relationships with time—blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future. Indeed, some have claimed that digital tools in urban spaces create an “eternal present¹⁸”, compelling individuals to develop a kind of digital ubiquity. This temporal complexity is

16 - fi5e a.k.a Evan Roth, « TATME Modern », sur Graffiti Research Lab, 28 mai 2008 (en ligne : <https://graffitiresearchlab.com/blog/tatme/> ; consulté le 11 novembre 2024)

17 - Cf. Interview with Evan Roth, 30/05/2025.

18 - Bailly Émeline et Dorothée Marchand, Ville numérique. La qualité urbaine en question, Wavre, Mardaga, coll. « Architecture », 2021.

precisely what some artists are exploring, notably within the practice of graffiti.

Well aware of its ephemerality, graffiti writers have long documented their work, using mainly analog photography. Digital tools have made this documentation far more accessible and affordable. Beyond facilitating the act of photographing, digital technology has also simplified the dissemination of the images. Photography and video operate as archives – the only testimonies left after the potential erasure of graffiti, and artists are now consciously integrating these mediums into their creations.

Archiving also serves as a tool for revealing the often-invisible issues involved in urban action. Swedish graffiti artist Adam¹⁹ points out that documenting work in urban spaces reveals the constraints, strategies, and negotiations that accompany graffiti production. Yet, for urban artists, building an archive represents an additional work next to their core practice: the act of documenting can become as much demanding as the creative act itself—particularly in the era of social media—to the extent that the archiving sometimes becomes the main objective of the project instead of a simple tool for memory and dissemination. Photographs then become relics of those moments/experiences, when the act of doing—the gesture, the appropriation of the space—takes precedence over the finished work, reducing the act of creation to a status of mere production of a representation.

For example, erasure is a recurring pattern in the work of the Italian graffiti artist Blu. He is known in particular for having himself intentionally erased some of his own murals to protest against the gentrification of certain neighborhoods, especially in Berlin. Erasure has even become a technique for him that he showcases in multiple short films. These are created using techniques inspired by traditional animation: Blu draws a figure on a wall, photographs it, erases parts of it, redraws the image introducing slight modifications, photographs it again, and so on. Sequentially edited, these photographs transform into moving pictures, giving the illusion of a

19 Id.

living, transforming mural. In *Muto*²⁰ video, for instance, a character repeatedly appears and disappears, mutates, and devours itself. The drawing not only animates on one same wall but moves on multiple surfaces – walls, doors, road, creating a sense of both spatial and temporal flux. While Blu considers these works as animated short films, the English graffiti artist Insa applies a similar process – though in a distinct style and for a different format – to produce GIFs. These very short digital animations are shared and downloadable on a dedicated website²¹, allowing a worldwide diffusion. Unlike films, GIFs are built around a fixed loop, endlessly repeating the same brief sequence. Insa does not overlap different temporalities; he extracts a piece of the city from the time course. These practices generate a hybrid space: urban but digital, material but immaterial, temporally immutable but fluid. Multiple temporalities coexist and overlap, raising questions of what persists materially on the walls, and which version remains visible.

Space and time are concepts generally intertwined. This interconnection is particularly evident in the case of graffiti; a practice whose very essence relies on both its spatial anchoring and its ephemeral nature. Space cannot be conceived as a neutral medium but must be understood as a social production, shaped by power relations, usages, and representations²². Therefore, analyzing graffiti requires situating it within the specific geographical, social, and cultural context that made its emergence possible. From this perspective, the Arcane Center²³—a digital archive founded by the Urban Art Federation²⁴ in France—is particularly

interesting. Graffiti can only be fully understood when placed back into its context, whether geographical, social, or cultural, in order to fully grasp its symbolic and political significance. Arcane facilitates this process by providing a database of graffiti organized by lists of locations. Beyond documenting graffiti as an aesthetic production and phenomenon, it enables its study as a situated practice, one that reveals the spatial, social, and temporal dynamics that condition its emergence and reception.

This idea of situating graffiti was explored in Mathieu Tremblin's *Tag Cloud* project. It consists of transforming hand-written tags into legible typed tags, alluding to the *word cloud*, a type of data visualization representing keyword frequency via variations in font size and weight. Typical of the 2000s, especially in blog-based SEO practices, the word clouds marked a shift from the personal, gestural aesthetics of handwriting to a programmatic, default aesthetic associated with digital standardization. In 2016 – approximately three years after the *Tag Cloud* project was put on hold –, as the works may already have physically disappeared from the public space, images of the project resurfaced on the Internet²⁵. The project generated a 'bad buzz'. Indeed, Internet users unfamiliar with the imagery specific to the early 2000s web did not get the reference to 'word clouds', which, during the era of blogs and early forums, served as a central tool for visually prioritizing content. The generational gap between the Internet of the 2000s – characterized by visual experimentation and community practices – and that of 2016, dominated by social media logic, partly explains this problematic reception. While in the 2010s the project highlighted

20 - MUTO a wall-painted animation by BLU, Buenos Aires ; Baden, s. d., 07:26 (en ligne : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuGaQLT-gO4> ; consulté le 5 octobre 2022)

21 - Insa, « About », sur Gif-iti, s. d. (en ligne : <https://www.gif-iti.com/about> ; consulté le 23 novembre 2024)

22 - H. Lefebvre, « La production de l'espace », op. cit.

23 - « Arcanes », sur *Fédération de l'Art Urbain*, s. d. (en ligne : <https://federationdelarturbain.org/arcanes/> ; consulté le 18 avril 2022)

24 - Founded in 2018, the Urban Art Federation is run

by artists, associations and professionals involved in urban art in order to promote urban art in France, cf. Fédération de l'Art Urbain, « Qui sommes nous ? », sur *Fédération de l'Art Urbain*, s. d. (en ligne : <https://federationdelarturbain.org/qui-sommes-nous/> ; consulté le 2 octobre 2025)

25 - K. Gillespie, « Mathieu Tremblin : faire le buzz, six ans après », *VICE*, 28 juillet 2016 (en ligne : <https://www.vice.com/fr/article/legible-graffiti-viral-mathieu-tremblin/> ; consulté le 21 novembre 2024)

the role the Internet played in the circulation of graffiti artists' works, its come-back in a profoundly transformed media environment was accompanied by a decontextualization of its original message. In 2016, the *Tag Cloud* project went viral on websites specializing in graffiti and street art. Then one image was posted on Reddit without caption, sparking numerous reposts and comments. The project was perceived as a hygienist and anti-graffiti endeavor, aimed at erasing inscriptions deemed 'dirty' or 'illegible' and in favor of 'cleaner' and 'more legible' forms. Such reposts brought back an anonymity of the work and paradoxically recalls the original experience of graffiti in urban spaces. Indeed, anonymity and collective reuse are integral parts of the graffiti practice. Nevertheless, the false discourse attached to the project confuses both its artistic intent and its digital reference. This episode underlines how much the context – both geographical but also temporal – is essential to fully grasp the essence of graffiti.

Oral memory plays a central role in the transmission of this counterculture. It preserves and passes on the history of practices, urban legends, and the personal experiences of graffiti artists. As former Swedish graffiti artist Tobias Lindblad recalls: "[...] behind every piece of graffiti there is a story. You start to take an interest in graffiti, to practice. You meet other graffiti artists, and you share personal stories and urban legends.²⁶" Such testimonies contribute to the construction of the graffiti artist's myth, although often omitting the moments of vacancy, spent waiting or spotting the adequate painting spot. Yet, in their *Mediterranean Sky* video, 1UP do show some of these 'empty' moments: the process and the difficulties of accessing the ship, transporting the materials. They fully immerse the spectators in the graffiti writing experience—immersion which is accentuated by the immersive point of view used at some moments of the video.

26 - Tobias Lindblad in M. Tremblin, « Le graffiti comme carte psychogéographique », *op. cit.*

« [...] derrière chaque graffiti il y a une histoire. Vous commencez à vous intéresser au graffiti, à pratiquer. Vous rencontrez d'autres graffiteurs, et vous partagez histoires personnelles et légendes urbaines »

4. Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of graffiti's mutations in the digital age shows that technologies do not merely increase the visibility of this practice; they profoundly transform its spatial and temporal logics; they turn graffiti into both an archive and an experience, where memory, context, and representation intertwine across physical and virtual terrains. Historically conceived as a physical and subversive reappropriation of urban space, graffiti now finds new modes of expression through the hybridization of materiality and immateriality, ephemeral gestures and enduring archives, subcultural codes and global dissemination. By blurring the boundaries between space and time, between urban and digital, between physical presence and algorithmic circulation, between past and present, graffiti sheds light on broader transformations in our relationship to the city and to collective memory. It encourages us to reconceptualize the city not solely as a space governed by commercial visibility and technological surveillance, but as a site of negotiation and experimentation, where street art functions as a critical and performative tool. In this way, digital graffiti expands rather than erases its protesting legacy, exploring new modes of experience and transmission that articulate resistance, creativity, and the reinvention of urban imaginaries.

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