



Urban Metaphysics: Creating Game Layers on Top of the World

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Every new technology disrupts the previous rhythms of consciousness.

– Joseph Nechvatal¹

Introduction

To walk into the [Art in the Streets](#) exhibition at the Geffen Contemporary in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo neighborhood is to enter a realm of pure, unadulterated street art. It is also to experience what is now a thriving knowledge culture that merges specialized forms of representation: alphabets, drawings, paintings (graffiti), films/videos, choreographic notations based on symbolic, linguistic and scientific formulations, programming languages, hardware (robotics, handheld devices), software (game platforms), and more.² This work emerged from a culture that has grown through the creation and application of forms that reflect the imaginings of urban, futurism-inspired, hip-hop-styled texts that are "rich in imagery and metaphor and can be used to teach irony, tone, diction and point of view."³ The artists behind these works use the urban environment as their canvas that provides a basic framework to contextualize and evaluate the production of specialized art forms. This essay expands upon media-related discourse of a kind of ontology, or "metaphysics of presence," to describe urban artists' encounters with semiotics, syncretic reality, and virtuality.⁴

This essay presents an analysis of street (urban) art production as a coherent, multidisciplinary topic of investigation that conceives of a relation between material and virtual domains and the evolving style of street artists. Such development has largely been unexplored in scholarly discourse and is open for interrogation and debate. In the "syncretic reality" space revealed by artist-theorist Roy Ascott, these urbanized styles emerge from a convergence of computer-mediated communication networks, altered states of consciousness, and "metaphors drawn from biology, quantum physics, field theory, language, combined with cultural, social and spiritual practices, in a hybrid space of potentiality."⁵ Theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the notion of "style" and he describes a kind of ontology or "metaphysics of presence" to describe the artist's encounter with the world that is accounted for in a distorted way by science.⁶ To create conceptual maps of this psychogeography, modern graffiti pioneers like RAMMELLZEE, Futura, and others provide artistic guideposts fueled by the increasing ubiquity of computing and information technology that offer opportunities to deviate from canonical forms of art and represent a complex syntheses of biological and technological apparatuses of the body. Here, "Wild Style" is in full effect, calling forth what I call "urban metaphysics:" artistic, cultural production translated from material spaces to virtual, alternate, and augmented reality game layers on top of a dystopic world.⁷



FIGURE 1 - RAMMELLZEE . "Gasholear" (b-boy bricolage), circa 1985.



FIGURE 2 - Doze Green. "Troubles Never Come Alone", site installation, 2008.



FIGURE 3 - Futura and LEGOs.

[M]y body is visible and mobile, and a thing among things. It is not, however, just a "chunk of space" but an "intertwining of vision and movement" – Merleau-Ponty⁸

Street art production includes theories and practices that reveal and build upon creative methods that twist, interlock, converge, and diverge media texts in a type of rhizomaniac, capitalistic, and cultural schizophrenia.⁹ "Wild Style," which in graffiti describes a complicated piece constructed with interlocking letters, also characterizes the development of experimental art forms, computer-controlled assemblages, and augmented, virtual reality tools.¹⁰

The city is becoming wildstyle and wildstyle uses capitalism's decoding equipment ("the terrorist power of the media ... symbolic destruction") against the social and semiological reterritorializations of consumer capitalism. – Jean Baudrillard¹¹

This production counteracts and creates responses to modern globalization and, as a central aspect of this activity, media texts are visual manifestations of a desire to leave one's mark. Television, comic books, video games, and emerging technologies provide domains for alternative, futuristic worlds that enable practitioners and scholars to explore their understanding of where cultural space is developing today. This is further explicated by "cybism," a term that describes a "system dynamics with a hybrid blending (cybridization) of the computational supplied virtual with the analog."¹² Syncretism is a parallel cultural practice that brings together disparate technologies (interactive and digital, for example), new rituals of communication (mobile, online), and communities that remain open to the incorporation of older knowledge contexts.¹³



FIGURE 4 - RAMMELLZEE , "Battle Station"
New York City, 2005 .



FIGURE 5 - RAMMELLZEE . "Battle Station" (MOCA LA), 2011.

RAMMELLZEE was an artist and theorist who lived for twenty years in a Tribeca studio loft nicknamed the Battle Station. (Figure 4-5) For the Art in the Streets exhibition the curators transported this studio to the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA Los Angeles for public viewing. The centerpiece of this installation is the urban samurai avatar armor worn by the artist during live performances. Battle

Station is a part of what the artist called "gothic futurism," an urban art manifesto, cultural aesthetic, and sociohistorical genre that embeds history, science, science fiction, mathematics, and technology.¹⁴ RAMMELLZEE's visionary theory and design practice offers a totalizing look at the impact of the various institutions that govern behavior and the transmission of knowledge. Gothic futurism reveals urban metaphysics (of presence) as a scholarly equivalent of "street smarts," street knowledge, or a knowledge (epistemic) culture that merges ancient systems of knowledge such as "sacred geometry," cosmology, Western esotericism, and alphabets with mass media and popular culture. Battle Station is evidence of the artist's design process in a kind of "telematic" mode of production.¹⁵

Just as with the artist, the designer becomes a system that includes both human and artificial intelligence. – Roy Ascott¹⁶

Battle Station simulates syncretic reality and cybism with urban bricolage and street fashion surrounded by customized instruments and systems the artist called "letter racers," "monster models," and "garbage gods" – objects designed to access the "telememory" and "virtualisation" of the urban environment."¹⁷ This work invites visitors to become immersed in RAMMELLZEE's metaverse, or in what Ascott might describe as a "fluid moving stream of data configurations, embodied in networks, on screens, in material structures, in installations and environments, endlessly open to transformation and change."¹⁸



FIGURE 6 - "RAMMELLZEE Gothic Futurism" in *Second Life*.



FIGURE 7 - Bomb the World: The Still Free Edition.

The Wild Style aesthetic, along with experimental art practices and cultural spaces, form a model for emergent game world art and

performance such as in perceptually immersive 3D worlds like Second Life. (Figure 6) This development counters the “hegemony of play” that infuses game world experiences with values and norms that reinforce the commercialization of the world and creates a “cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued.”¹⁹ The following examples merely scratch the surface of what is possible with game platforms and further expands the scope of experimental critical media theory. The exploration of biological and technological apparatuses of the body, merging of domains/realities, and Wild Style abstractions suits the experimental game genre.

Ikonoklast Panzerism, Urban Bricolage and Cultural Schizophrenia

And the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls.

– Simon and Garfunkel, The Sounds of Silence²⁰

Making a delineation between narrative and discursive space is critical to understanding the shift that takes place in game worlds such as Bomb the World: The Still Free Edition where players become a part of the story or scene, which also consists of user-generated art created with in-world tools in real time and in simulations of urban environments across the globe. (Figure 7)

Emergent, experimental game worlds provide structures for multiple narrative spaces. These worlds are not singular or linear, but designed for cooperative interaction and participation between games and players/users. The computer game is a narrative space in which semiotic structures (layers) can be projected, or displayed to create new realities and worlds.

Depending upon the player’s response, the computer presents more space, more images, more text to explore ... The movement between the episodes and places is dependent on the player’s interactions with the game or intrusions into the given space. – Karin Wenz²¹

Bomb the World uses vocabulary that reflects hip-hop elements – graffiti, break dancing/b-boying, emceeing, etc. – that employ verbal, written, or performative forms of representation from language, kinetics and aerodynamics. This practice relies on sign relations that consist of letters or word forms (tags, burners, etc.) that also describe spatial environments, objects of reference, and mental representations of spatial perception.²² RAMMELLZEE developed his own specialized vocabulary dating back to the early 1980s. He lived in relative obscurity and his work received minimal media coverage.²³ (Figure 8) However, his contributions have made an indelible mark on street art production, influencing contemporaries such as Doze Green and Futura (formerly Futura 2000) and theorist Joseph Nechvatal who coined the term “cybism” as a cultural phenomenonology.²⁴



FIGURE 8 - “Bi-Conicals of the RAMMELLZEE / Beat Bop (with art by Jean-Michel Basquiat).”

Ikonoklast Panzerism, as part of Gothic Futurism consists of “formulations on the juncture between black and Western sign systems.”²⁵ As a narrative space it describes the battle between letters and their symbolic warfare against standardizations enforced by the rules of the alphabet.²⁵ Panzerized letter forms, as media texts, are a basis for a symbolic and semiotic structure that relies on social interstices that mark or inscribe upon the body specific signs generated by mass culture. Post-structuralist critiques of the metaphysics of presence have moved beyond citing language as the fundamental analogy for comprehending signifying practices to a place where textuality, when opened to notions of difference, expands and merges with totality.²⁶

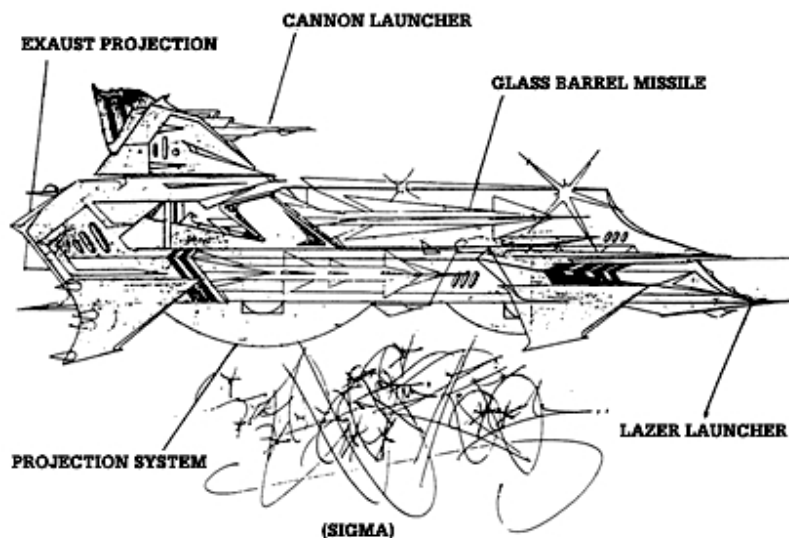


FIGURE 9 - "Sigma" by RAMMELLZEE.

FIGURE 10 - "RAMMELLZEE Gothic Futurism" in *Second Life*.

An even greater source of inspiration was the alphabet itself, and its usage in graffiti. Other graffiti artists sprayed walls and subway cars. RAMMELLZEE worked either on paper or in his own imaginative style of 3-D. [...] He would talk about letters in three dimensions, using metaphorical terms, describing elements of individual letters as 'armouring,' and the arrows we used in Wild Style graffiti as shooting missiles. – Vivien Goldman²⁷

Gothic Futurism links metaphysics of presence with urbanized expressions, techniques, and concepts within a suspended, hybridized form situated somewhere between a mystical prehistory, subjugated past, hyper-sensitized present, and technological future. RAMMELLZEE and his contemporaries developed a complex, subversive philosophy against existing systems. Ikonoklast Panzerism traces the origins of this conflict to the very building blocks of language – letters that are "armed to contradict their sight and phonetic value."²⁸ (Figures 9 – 10) In its origins, modern graffiti and street art production was largely part of hip-hop subculture and these specialized forms of style and expression were developed mostly by urban minorities. But now it is a global phenomenon crossing race, class, and gender boundaries. The Wild Style battles which artists like RAMMELLZEE waged on language (through graffiti) were, in a sense, part of a war for the "singular, Romantic authorship that has been denied certain disempowered groups by the portrayal of their culture as 'collectivized,' as a 'folk' culture," in popular discourse.²⁹ A natural progression for this movement is to explore multiple modalities and domains such as virtual environments, computer, and game-based platforms.

Graffiti 3D – Graffiti Analysis

At this point readers might be wondering what the difference is between augmented, alternative, or virtual reality games: Virtual is one hundred percent digital; augmented is fifty percent digital, or halfway between the real world and virtual reality; and alternate reality is the least digital. Mixed-reality, game world platforms are mechanisms for exploring forms of representation and narrative story elements. Leading the way for open source, mobile technologies is [Graffiti Analysis](#), an extensive ongoing study in the motion of graffiti.³⁰ [Graffitiurism](#) is an online social network that highlights new work which captures “transcendental elements” and “style schizophrenics bound by structure.”³¹

[G]raffiti is merely a term for the compression of all art forms that ever existed past and present into one paradigm, ranging from early stone and cave paintings morphing into language, elaborate murals to what we now call contemporary art. Graffiti is one of the only art forms that do not emphasize (as) content the word, but its proportion and movement through space. — Percy Fortini-Wright³²

Synthetic, or cybernetic depictions of the body in space have become linked within an episteme that transmutes well-known language and practices that are inscribed upon the body.³³ Machines, robots, eighteenth-century European prototypes, even weapons of mass destruction are signs in this context – signs which represent mental models of human presence in the environment. This notion of presence involves the externalization of internal knowledge that is part of a process of abstracting a foundational schema (cultural model) from memory and transforming it into personal conceptual models.³⁴ Artists/designers are challenged to interpret and create new cultural models by virtue of various relationships to other elements internal to shared sign systems.

Going in and out, it's pulling stuff from inside. It's based on magic, it's about shadow, it's about darkness, it's about light, it's about understanding, and it's about destruction. It's about build-destroy. – Doze Green³⁵

Doze Green Video

Doze Green's current body of work consists of paintings that translate complex metaphysical concepts that resonate with urban futurism, such as the "possible manipulation of energy and matter to create a timeless space."³⁶ Doze practices the art of breaking, an acrobatic hip-hop dance style. Bodies in motion effortlessly translate into new symbolic, linguistic, and spatial formulations. The performative language of hip-hop – the windup, tilt, float, or freeze – generates dance poses and letters that are manipulated into recognizable forms. The wave (motion) becomes the letter "S"; arrows that are used to make letters aerodynamic are also gestures in dance routines, indicating directional or elemental forces in the environment. Doze Green correlates this self-referential language to the metamorphosis of physical and geometric entities going through a natural progression from letterforms into characters and dance poses.³⁷ This language can be translated into software designed for graffiti writers like Graffiti Analysis, which saves tags as Graffiti Markup Language (GML) files, a digital standard used by other computer-based applications.³⁸

The Cybist Zeitgeist and the Game Layers on Top of the World

Futura was one of the first to translate "Wild Style" graffiti to other forms of art as a synthetic purification and intensification of certain ideas and visual elements.³⁹ In the nineties he gravitated to the World Wide Web to create an archive of original work and to communicate with users on multi-dimensional levels.⁴⁰ Futura's latest medium is electronic LEGO sculpture, or what the artist refers to as a "pneumatic actuation system" merging "air pressure, battery operation: new school, battery operation: old school ... and the newest technology: NXT."⁴¹ "NXT" refers to Lego Mindstorms NXT, a programmable robotics kit. Physical computing merely extends the work he has been creating for decades and manifests as electronic urban bricolage in syncretic reality. It is important to note that most of the work featured here is male-dominated reflecting, on a lesser level, "hegemony of play" even in marginalized contexts. However, a growing number of women are making waves in experimental and serious games.⁴²



FIGURE 11 - "giantJoystick" by Mary Flanagan.

Jane McGonigal has proclaimed that "reality is broken" and is part of a movement to subvert mainstream (attack) game mechanics to make the world a better place.⁴³ Mary Flanagan created "giantJoystick," a large, functioning game controller /interface with which players collectively navigate classic ATARI arcade games. (Figure 11) Flanagan designs interfaces that require players to collaborate and interact in different ways.⁴⁴ McGonigal, Flanagan, Celia Pearce, and Daphne Dragona are among a growing number of female game designers, scholars, and curators who are identifying ways in which games are designed for cooperative interaction and participation between games and players/users. It is only a matter of time before a female street artist like Swoon can make use of digital and mobile-based tools that play with tangible and virtual space, or blended realities as conceptually driven, creative explorations of the urban experience. Experimental games challenge an entrenched status quo that ignores "minority" players such as women and "non-gamers," who represent the majority of the population.⁴⁵

It makes perfect sense that the subway system would literally become the "vehicle." It just happened, it invited it. Suddenly graffiti wasn't limited to tenement halls, schoolyard walls, and bathroom stalls. Graffiti had found the speed at which it needed to be seen. To keep in step with the fast pace of communication and information sharing. What had started out as playing in subway tunnels had progressed into midnight forays deep in the interiors of the system. – Futura⁴⁶

Cybism validates the "reductional break-down" in urban art and defines a general, emerging sensibility that respects the integration of art, science, technology and consciousness – "a consciousness struggling to attend to the prevailing current spirit of our age."⁴⁷

It is important to capture the specific aspects of this production in order to formulate new inscriptions and representations that can be built upon and worked with to expand the search for new ways of creating, especially with computer-mediated systems and virtual, mobile interfaces that are inherently interactive and transformative.⁴⁸ The acquisition of this work is epistemically advantageous and can facilitate a broader understanding that extends to electronic art and emergent game technologies.

Building Block Weaponry Video (Futura 200)

Newly imagined narrative spaces built on conceptual, mobile and online gaming media platforms are the next level in technological progress. Transmedia efforts such as Out My Window and Pandemic 1.0 fuse urban documentary film with multiple story elements.⁴⁹ Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) generate worlds that are nowhere in actuality, but are nonetheless real and can be interacted with.⁵⁰ Unlike massively multiplayer online games (MMORPGs) like World of Warcraft, ARGs gather players together to unfold, participate in, and interact with story world elements such as websites, videos, or mobile applications.⁵¹ EVOKE is an ARG where players can build a collective story or work together to imagine alternative futures.⁵² Emergent, experimental game platforms and transmedia storytelling enable new, dynamic models for expression, interaction, and participation – to create game layers on top of the world.

Highrise/Out My Window <<http://www.telegraph21.com//video/highriseout-my-window>>

Trailer for the EVOKE ARG

Tagged in Motion Video

Tagged in Motion synchronizes gestural movement with an augmented layer of laser graffiti tags in space similar to the technology created at the Graffiti Research Lab. (Figure 12) It combines “real graffiti art and its virtual 3D portrayal.”⁵³ Equipped with a handheld augmented reality tool, artist DAIM sprays graffiti into empty space. (Figure 13) Three motion-capture cameras record his position and the movements he executes with a virtual spray can. The resulting data is shown to him in real time through a pair of video glasses – as free-floating three-dimensional graffiti in space.⁵⁴ Evolving cultural practices (cybism, syncretism) will continue to converge on emergent game platforms that explore the potentiality of narrative spaces to solve real problems, map specialized forms of representations, and bring together disparate communities that share an interest in these systems, whether found in code, Hollywood, or on the street.⁵⁵



FIGURE 12 - “GRL Laser Tagging” at The Last HOPE in NYC.



FIGURE 13 - “DAIM – all directions.” Oil on canvas.

A case study for real world problem solving is the Graffiti Grapher application created by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI).⁵⁶ (Figure 14) Ethnomathematician Ron Eglash and his computing team developed this web-based applet that uses graffiti artifacts and practices as a means to engage learners in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) concepts. Alternative Futures: Culturally Situated Game-Based Learning is an innovative planning project (launching in fall 2011) that merges successful and proven models of game-based learning with culturally situated digital media strategies to help bridge the gap in STEM learning among under-represented minority students and non-traditional learners. This will be achieved using Graffiti Grapher and other existing “Culturally Situated Design Tools” and applying them to existing virtual 3D and augmented reality toolkits created at the

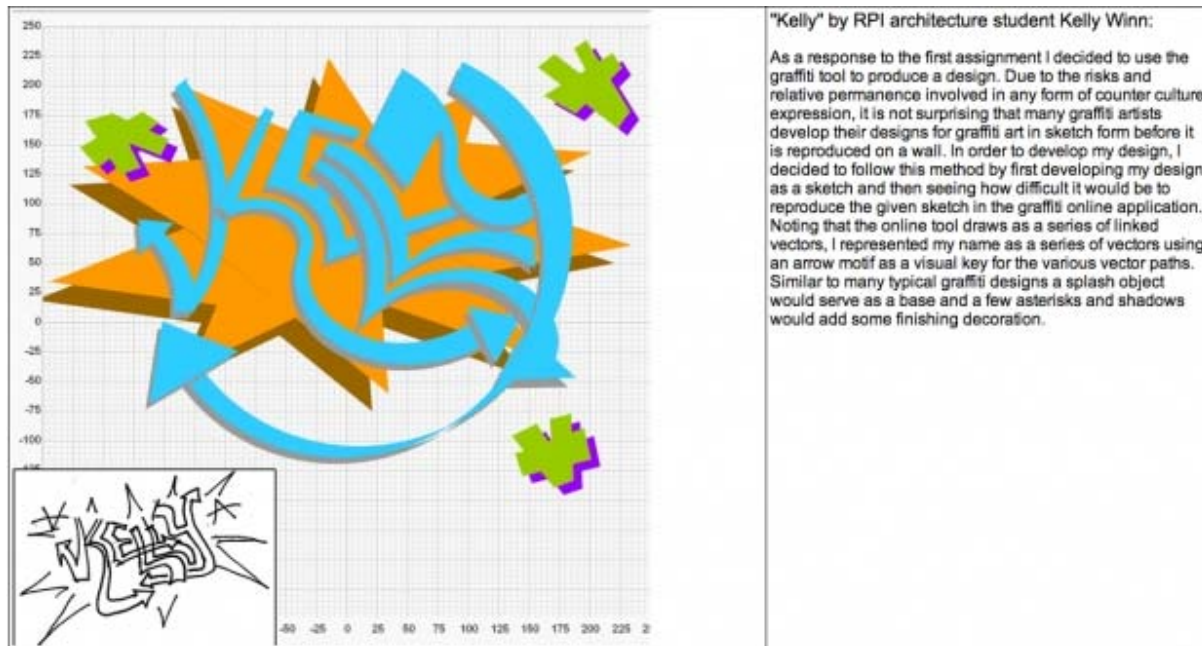


FIGURE 14 - "Graffiti Grapher" CSDT from the RPI web site. © All Rights Reserved, 2003.

Conclusion

My strategy in the above analysis is to demonstrate why urban metaphysics and street art deserve a much larger interpretive and narrative context beyond existing discourse. Experimental, emergent game-related technologies are the next layer of development and require careful investigation. This analysis reveals resonances of a thriving street art and culture on digital media. It is a multi-faceted attempt to position this production in broader cultural, historical, and theoretical purviews of which audiences that are familiar with certain aspects are already cognizant. This move ultimately aspires to inscribe, or even imagine, a potential place for urban futurism (and its subsets) and hip-hop in the next phase of conceptual and technological innovation in order to inform a more meaningful critical theory of epistemic culture that is responsive to empiricism and constituted by models of recognition and reflection.

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