

Writing on the Ruins or graffiti as a design gesture: On the paradoxes of lettering place and history

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At the same time that Banksy's books rub shoulders with Braque and Botticelli albums in art history sections at Borders bookstores¹, Tony Blair strikes a formidable pose for press photographers. Training the power-hose on a graffiti covered wall, he takes on a heroic task of eradicating most pressing social concerns.² In a rhetorically powerful shorthand, the target of the government campaign, antisocial behaviour, is illustrated with its most evil symptom and the nastiest of its possible outcomes: spray can art. Even though there is no mention of graffiti in the body of the articles reporting on proposed radical ways of improving social order, all newspapers carry similar images on their front pages. Large bright pictures assure us that once the lettering on public walls is dealt with, the issues of urban poverty, property neglect, youth delinquency, drunken brawls, as well as crimes of aesthetics, such as loitering and littering, will have been effectively addressed.³

We are all familiar with images of graffiti, and we do not have to study this urban subculture to be stunned by its raw beauty. And while in their ubiquity graffiti

images may have lost their shock value, some still hold the power to arrest our attention and generate strong emotions. Looking at the photograph of graffiti scrawled on the usually pristine walls of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) has an unsettling effect. The familiar space of the gallery is covered with colourful smears and slogans intent on representing the resolutely bilingual urban surface of Montreal. In this image, the walls are prepped for the 1994 show *Urban revisions*, an exhibition of urban interventions. None of the projects presented in the show had a local dimension or related to specific local condition. While no mention of the urban graffiti could be found in the catalogue filled with learned essays on the American city, the painted "wallpaper" of the gallery space provided the familiar "vernacular", a connection with the street and with the particular, even if quite obviously rendered as a single design gesture. The shock of seeing the messy scrawls in the high temple of architectural asceticism and design purity, drew the crowds to the exhibition and attested to the radical vision of the curators.⁴



Graffiti occupies this curious and conflicted position as a social problem, political act and increasingly an aesthetic phenomenon. While so visible, so much in the public eye, while increasingly exploited by the world of politics or high art, commerce or academia, its potent meaning is rarely examined **in depth** or **in context**, rarely engaged through a rigorous study. Material forms of writing are not given much space in the curricula or in critical, theoretical or historical reflection and graffiti is most often treated as a visually attractive (photo- or media-genic) empty sign, invested with meaning and colonized by often conflicted discourses of politics, business, advertising, even critical theory. Certainly, there are exceptions, as demonstrated, for example, by Roy Harris (in his theoretical treatment of the graphic space of linguistic signs)⁵ or Paul Carter (both in his critical reflection and public art praxis).⁶ We can safely make a claim, though, that we know little about **public writing** and typically we do not investigate it in ways that could yield questions more challenging than the standard labelling dilemma of art versus crime and the base narratives that follow one or the other trajectory.

Contemporary art and design abounds with images of graffiti scrawls and messy handwriting. In addition to preoccupation with the hip-hop culture and historical links with New York, Paris, and Berlin⁷ and conventional associations with the avant-garde art and the urban scene in general, graffiti or graffiti-like writing is increasingly employed to evoke the individual voice or place identity, endorse authenticity, even substantiate historical memory. And with an accelerated speed since the 90s, graffiti aesthetics has shaped both common imaginary and professional design vocabulary. It has become not only accepted, but emulated and venerated, and recent generations of graphic designers as well as the viewers of images have been formed through looking at or creating various reiterations of the graffiti idiom.⁸

What I would like to offer here is a reflection on the paradoxes of lettering in relation to place and history. I will examine graffiti marks **in context**, in their place of display and I will attend to their signifying **surface**. I will propose to treat graffiti as a topo-sensitive mark and a materially consequential act⁹ and as such demanding an **examination in situ**, requiring a **close reading** that could account for the temporal and spatial dimensions of the siting as well as the specific positioning in the historical and political context of the surrounding discourse.

I will probe two cases that in an interesting way foreground seemingly different uses and treatment of graffiti: one is an ephemeral, local and perhaps not very consequential design gesture, the other a major architectural monument of historical ambition and international significance. The first is the case of **designed writing**, the latter of a **restoration of authentic graffiti marks**. The first, a rushed journalistic commission, the second a painstakingly detailed and elaborate major work of (public) art. Both make claims on historical memory of a specific place and as such, I claim, highlight the complexities and ethics of the uses of graffiti in contemporary design. In each case, the close examination of the **writing in context** yields an insight into the relationship of graffiti to place and may illuminate larger issues often hidden behind a common in the current discourse glib and expedient aesthetic preoccupation with expressive style and the subversive nature of graffiti idiom. My aim here is to argue for the value of **close reading** of graffiti (and images in general) as a technique of disturbing recalcitrant conceptual habits and attending to the nuance, materiality, and historical and political prescience of the intense visual statements around us.¹⁰

I will proceed with this discussion without much visual backup. The original presentation of this material involved over twenty slides, all arguably necessary for the substance of the argument and for the close reading proposed as a method of focusing on **writing in context**. In this paper, however, I am including only a single image. Intended to merely illustrate the concluding argument, this image of a graffiti piece is a visual provocation. It is non essential for the argument, though it has a major advantage over other pictures that were considered: it is not burdened with any copyright restrictions. The reader is challenged to contemplate the absence of necessary images in the context of various limitations on access to (copyrighted) visual material and the related implications of the restricted possibilities of research on graffiti.

A graffiti mark is an inherently public statement. It often attempts territorial claims, but typically makes no assertion of propriety or ownership. It is open to appropriations. Once repositioned as a work of art, elevated to a monument, or revised into an instrument of ideology, it is no longer open to the elements and its access becomes (safe)guarded. Possibilities of its visual research become limited by the types of access allowed. The limitations on copyrights for the material intended for inclusion here, imposed an unacceptable

revision to the emphasis of the argument pursued. A radical step has been taken then: the original argument has remains but the reader is asked to engage with images through verbal description, a literal “reading” of the visual. The reader is asked to consider the absence of images, then, and in that reflection to face the kinds of problems that visual annexations and re-positioning of graffiti bring about.

On the wall of the ruined city

A striking image of graffiti-like lettering draws us to the cover of *The Globe and Mail Books* review supplement. This is an illustration for the featured interview with W.G. Sebald (originally recorded for a highly regarded CBC programme *Writers’ and Company*) and an announcement of the Canadian edition of Sebald’s last (posthumously published) book, *On the Natural History of Destruction*.¹¹

This grainy black and white photograph depicts a group of people walking toward the viewer. The group is flanked by the rubble and ruins of destroyed buildings. Overlaid on the image of the ruins are words rendered in stylized scrawls suggesting writing on the wall, crude graffiti hastily lettered by many different hands. The scribbled words are carefully composed, overlapping, yet clearly differentiated. The bruised gray of SURRENDER separates the black ink of BOMBS and HATRED, bright red of STENCH balances a more muted red of TERROR, the colour of rust is assigned to GUILT and that of dried blood to HORROR. Next to BOMBS is RUINED rendered in puter. Lettered in laden grey, SILENCE eloquently falls into the empty space between the group in the foreground and the lonely figure walking away from the viewer. The lettering seems deliberately positioned so as not to cover any of the faces of the people depicted, to stay on the ruins. As if to retain its power of the writing on the wall, even if the wall itself was reduced to rubble, and further made immaterial in the image and its manipulation. (In order to make the superimposed lettering more prominent, the background is conveniently “faded”).

The small caption in a neutral type relates the cover illustration to the content of the issue. If the words shaped, coloured and placed on the image above are to evoke some “authentic” gesture, the Gibsonian “trace that outlasts the act”¹², how are they related to collective memory? What is the link between the words, both their choice and their graffiti-like form, and their subject matter, the war time devastation? Why are the words deemed necessary to depict the

horror of destruction? Why proclaim RUINED instead of showing the ruins themselves? Why the gauze of text over the image of the mortal wounds of the street? Is the image of the rubble not eloquent enough? And why crude lettering? Why is the expressive scrawl seen as an appropriate design choice that befits the ruins? Is the stylized scribble of the word BOMBS more evocative than the archival image of the bombs’ material consequence? Is the graffiti supposed to evoke a personal statement marking the wall of the wounded city? Whose statement?

If the writing is to suggest a personalized, spontaneous expression then, what is the meaning of its language? Of course the cover addresses an English speaking reader, but does not the language impose an uneasy specificity here, a certain semantic ambiguity? Whose SHAME? Whose GUILT? And whose HORROR? The language of those who smelled that STENCH, those on whom the BOMBS fell, was not English. However, the English language was strongly implicated in the RUINED. Its symbolic position is not neutral in the context of this specific historic moment if these ruins are to refer to the subject of Sebald’s book, that is the Allied Forces’ bombing of German cities.

Which city is it? Dresden? Berlin? The rubble hidden behind the lettering gives no clues. The people in the photograph cannot be clearly placed either. An old woman in the background in her kerchief seems timeless, placeless perhaps, if not vaguely East European. The skirt of a younger woman to the right has a hint of a bias cut of the ‘70s. And the bucket carried by the woman in the foreground seems strangely contemporary. Is it plastic?! Could it be that the photograph is from another place? From another war? The Balkan war rather than the one Sebald’s reflections probed? And does it matter? Is not a bombed city just a bombed city? Don’t they all look the same, after all? Don’t they all speak of the same horror once moved into a generic archival image? Don’t they all provide a good background for a letter-or word-play? And would not just any bombed city be a fitting illustration for Sebald’s book?

The letters seem blatantly didactic while pretending to represent the emotion of the historical moment. Shaped into a sign of angry proclamation, they label the obvious while drawing attention to themselves, obscuring the place they write over, obscuring its trauma. The writing here offers a simplistic abstraction of history that forces a historical event into a standard

image. It is a generic expressive lettering on unspecific ruins. Yet its rhetoric depends on the power of handwriting and the archival image deliberately paired with the writing is meant to illustrate specific thoughts and texts presented in the review. The article on Sebald's work is entitled, "You Must Remember This." "This" is hardly generic. For Sebald, time and place were burdened with history. For him, not only words but photographs and mental images of a place, formed the **consequential evidence** of a specific moment and particular memory. His family history and memories were implicated in bombing of Dresden. And in his last book he attempts to break the silence on the trauma inflicted on the civilian population by the Allied Forces systematic fire bombing of German cities.

The photo credit on page 2 of *The Globe and Mail's* supplement dutifully notes CORBIS/MAGMA image pool. The place of the photographed scene is not acknowledged. The value of copyright placed above the worth of history. It is not important for the designer to identify the image. The place obviously functions here as a generic entity. After my insistent inquiries, the art director of *The Globe and Mail*, confirms that the photo was taken in Mannheim, Germany, in 1945. He does not sound convincing, however, more like annoyed with such irrelevant probing, as if suspicious of my motives for questioning. The designer, clearly uneasy when asked about his design decision, speaks rather defensively of the deadliness and pressures to produce an eye catching cover image.¹³

By contrast to this focus on expediency, Sebald's writing is nuanced, complex, has nothing of the clearly didactic feel of the blatant verbalizations. It addresses the public memory of the German postwar society, the silenced memory, repressed feelings rather than the overtly proclaimed. It is all about dwelling in detail. The book cover of *On the Natural History of Destruction* is respectful of the writer's sentiments. It features a plain but most expressive photograph, split by the title into the immediate cause (bombers) and effect (burning city) fields on the front cover, and shown in one piece on the back of the jacket. Sebald's words quoted on the back cover reflect the importance of documentary images for his writing, with both text and photographs implicated, "embedded in the recall of past time."

Here, design credits clearly identify the photograph revealing other layers of history, and other players involved in the construction and destruction of public memory in post-war Germany. The photograph of a

street in Berlin was taken on the day when the Soviet Army raised its red flag over the Reichstag thus marking the complex ways that the German and Soviet history and memory are entangled together. Placed on the book cover, the photograph unambiguously draws the Allied forces into this complex historical mesh. A larger question that drives these reflections is: can the place-specific memory be conveyed through stock photography (generic imagery) and stylized type (generic graffiti)? Each, the archival photograph and the stylized lettering are used to add a sense of authenticity to the representation. The authenticity of neither, however, neither the image nor writing, is separable from references to place and place-representation. Each is a record of place: a document of a scene or a trace of an action. Each is an evidence of the specific: the photographer's particular point of view and the framing of the particular visual situation, and the gesture and intention of the writer, the personal statement and emotional content of crude personal lettering.

Commemorating writing

Published at the same time as Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Norman Foster's book *Reichstag Graffiti* also addresses the questions of German collective memory.¹⁴ In essays, archival documents, exquisitely detailed drawings and stunning close up photographs by Reinhard Görner, the book documents what Foster terms "the process of revelation" and the procedure and method that for him reflected "a clear ethos of articulating [the] new intentions with the surviving historical fabric" (11,12). History acts as a design tool here. First, it presented a unique aesthetic opportunity when during the asbestos removal from the earlier reconstruction of the building the palimpsest of older surfaces and the powerful victorious Soviet graffiti was revealed. Second, powerful historical rhetoric has been employed to counter the ensuing debate over the wisdom and political implications of the graffiti restoration or removal. Foster's vision for retaining the marks and incorporating them into the new interior was eventually approved and carried out to completion. Now, history acts as an instrument of justification: a powerfully articulated argument backing up the decision of restoration and creating a protective mechanism to guarantee that critical voices stay at bay. The fierce dispute over the symbolism of the Soviet graffiti on the walls of the German parliament was not over at the time the book *Reichstag Graffiti* was published. It is an important book, claims Foster because it attests to the enduring power of graffiti

(13). Indeed it is and indeed it does, although my interpretation may carry Foster's intentions further than he would have expected, as I believe, any power can only benefit from some serious scrutiny.

The restored Reichstag features fragments of the original walls embedded in the new structure. The walls showcase the outlined palimpsests of scribbled Cyrillic letters. No need for golden frames (a suggestion made by a Russian artists, Iliya Khabakov, an idea not approved by the Bundestag's Arts Committee). The kind of framing that Foster employs is far more powerful. He uses history itself to outline graffiti pieces: fragments of the older walls acting as shields signalling territorial boundaries. The Bundestag commenced regular session in the Reichstag in 1999 but the debate over restored graffiti continued, and it is not a mere domestic dispute. The Russian ambassador in 2001 warned that erasing the graffiti would endanger the process of reconciliation between "the two peoples" particularly against the background of the anniversary of the German attack on his country (36). Graffiti, in this dispute has become a symbol of a unilateral historical truth: a re-inscribing of the Yalta agreement that interprets history of the Second World War as an honourable conflict between two giants, with no mention of consequences for the political and human bodies between them. The restoration monumentalizes the inscriptions, affording them the kind of attention that only the most precious frescoes or archaeological artefacts are typically granted (33). It also remakes the writing into aesthetic statements, exquisite visual fields composed into a 'correct' and agreed upon visual narrative of history.

The book canonizes graffiti: it reveres the process of restoration and its product, a significant work of art. The pages linger over the annotated reproductions of the crude scrawls preserved in carefully arranged compositions within the planes of the building interior walls. The images in the volume highlight the framing act of preservation: the palimpsest of historical traces is composed of outlined elements arranged to indicate the layers of "history" through a play of surfaces and the juxtaposition of the "spontaneity" of the lines of graffiti and the controlled crispness of the older traces against the building's modern surfaces. The elevation drawings of the positions and details of the carefully delineated elements highlight the beauty of this visual choreography, the skill of the artist behind this composition and its rendering.

The exotic shapes of the Cyrillic letters (in the linguistic context of contemporary Berlin legible only at a symbolic level) and the crudeness of their lines evoke the magic powers of primitive surface markings. The specific historical symbolism has little to do with this. The "individual mark" is used merely for its emotional content, its power to evoke spontaneity that breaks the rigidity of architectural planes. If the walls of Reichstag speak of any conflict, it is the conflict between the emotional and historical content of the letters and the image they form once they are carefully composed, first on the walls and further on the pages of the book thereby confirming the project's status as a work of art (36). What is monumentalized here is a designer's (artist's) hand, the artful act of memorization itself.

The book remains the only place with a true public access. The actual spaces that contain restored graffiti are not open to the elements (whether of social discourse or environmental stress), neither are they easily accessible to the general public. So this loaded public writing is removed from the public realm into the frame of "historical evidence" into the volume that sets it out for specifically guided viewing. It is the only place where the images can be closely read, where the German speaking public, whose history is set out in this "living museum" can decipher the Cyrillic writing. The writing itself is difficult to examine in situ, so Foster's book is a precious tool of access to his project. It forms a separate site of display. And it creates its own defensive wall. It monumentalizes the project of restoration in what is effectively a catalogue of Foster's artwork.

But Foster is **not** a neutral artistic force here; his project is the British offering towards re-building of unified Berlin. Yet to justify the design choice, the presented history of the Second World War "paints over" the role the Soviets played in building Hitler's power and in subjugating Europe after the victory of 1945. One just needs to reflect on the names of places along the "victorious" route to Berlin (Grozny, Kiev, Lviv, Warsaw).¹⁵ The War chronology presented in the book is silent on the relationship between the "two peoples" in the time between September 1939 and February 1941 (123). Equating the fascist representation of Bolsheviks with those of Jews in 1937 exhibitions in the Reichstag and presenting a chronology of the war in a fast-forward from 1937 to 1945 suggests a continuity of Soviet "struggle" with fascism and puts the tragedy of the millions in the territories East of Reichstag outside of the viewing frame.¹⁶ Very much in line, in fact, with Soviet war and post-war propaganda.

Wars are battles over symbols and over the right to write history. Graffiti that covered the sandblock stones of the Reichstag, began as spontaneous acts commemorating fallen comrades, expressing pride or vengeance, marking a triumphant arrival at the end of the arduous journey. But it soon formed a collective theatre. A staged event of propaganda that folded an individual soldier into the grand performance of marking: the Reichstag was a 'guest book' set out for commentary on the "final" act of the war, and (again) "the venue for propaganda exhibitions" (18). Delegations from various Soviet cities would make ritual visits, signing the historical 'pages' with their marked presence (27). Crowds were arriving to partake in this ritual of signing. The officers scribbled (in blue crayons) along the more accessible surfaces; more daring writers, soldiers armed with charcoal, climbed the walls to those spots that would ensure high visibility of their signatures (24). The "writers" knew that for graffiti "getting up" was crucial.

The Reichstag writing had attained a symbol of a relic, with graffiti-covered stones on display at the National Army Museum in Moscow as "moving testaments to Soviet victory"(28). It became a powerful image of triumph: just like the Yevgeny Khaldei's photograph of the Red flag over the Reichstag (a staged, re-enacted scene to create a propaganda image). Graffiti was even more powerful as a performance aimed at the domestic audience: while there could be only one flag over the Reichstag, the writing could be unlimited: it was the people's symbol of victory. An ordinary soldier could make his own mark and his triumph could be personalized (27). The writing on the walls of defeated Berlin spoke eloquently with its crude lettering. No big words describing the the city's trauma, its horror, its stench, its ruins, its eerie silence or cheering after the battle. No need for verbalizing the obvious. The ruined city spoke expressively of its pain and defeat, without any alphabetic transcription. The writing on its walls was the voice of the victors. Not a subversive political act of rebellion but a staged happening, a proclamation of pride in the Soviet Nation (and its Great Leader) who defeated the Germans.

The Reichstag Graffiti book is a rhetorically powerful but historically problematic artist's statement. While evoking the ethos of restoration of memory and the argument for creation of "living museum" it uses history to justify design choices. The images of the markings, and the discourse that frames them, construct a simplified argument that *frames* history.¹⁷

The contentious question of appropriateness of this restoration project is framed into a bifurcated arguments of "open minded pro-graffiti group" and opposing them, the dark forces of ultra right anti-graffiti lobby (35). The advocates of the removal of graffiti are likened to the Holocaust deniers, and the book ends with a powerful words by a Jewish teacher calling for the necessity of examining memories. The Stalinist victorious rhetoric is thus propped up by the trauma of the Holocaust.¹⁸ The WWII is shown as a struggle between two mighty enemies, Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and the Holocaust is conveniently factored in as a rhetorical tool positioned *on par* with the Bolshevik struggle. Soviet historical accounts from the 1960s are validated as historical documents. Quoted at length they set the rhythm for the book's narrative they seem to be given as much power¹⁹ as invocation of the restorative powers of memory conveyed through the words of the Jewish that close the book.

Foster underscores the power of graffiti as he marvels over "how the scarred and graffiti-marked fabric of the Reichstag records the building's troubled past, and how these scars, once revealed, could be preserved, allowing the building to become "a living museum of German history" (17). Indeed, graffiti contains in its emotional gesture the imprint of the past, an individual voice, here validated even further by painstaking restoration. The history that is contained in these markings, however, is far too complex for the book's myopic frame. The marks themselves are far more eloquent. Graffiti's political power is always context-bound, locally nuanced and the book unwittingly submits to the deictic power of graffiti marking. Foster is right on his account of graffiti: Reichstag writing does speak eloquently of the local condition. But it attests both to the victory and the defeat. The presentation of history in the book, elevating the historical import of the restorative gesture and deflecting possible criticism, is in itself a defeat of historical and ethical discernment. How do these images published in the exquisite catalogue, inform the relationship between design and graffiti? Graffiti is used here as a design tool and its historical significance becomes its copyright.²⁰ Here, a mark that is inherently specific, validates a generic image of a selected historic memory. Or no longer historical, perhaps, but art historical (since the album emphasizes the aesthetics of the image of the mark and the composition of the page that displays it). The "tragedies and traumas of the past" are used as instruments for legitimating an aesthetic gesture of fitting graffiti scrawls into the compositional plane of the "architectural palimpsest."

Lettering place and history

The Cyrillic letters unambiguously mark Berlin, they have grown to become a symbol of its conflicted history.²¹ But they also mark a larger field of significance in this part of Europe. The writing on the Reichstag tells not only the story of the victory over fascism but also of the subjugation by the Soviets of the national and cultural territories of “Eastern Europe.”²² While Sebald is aware of the tragic commonality of fate between Warsaw and bombed German cities,²³ Foster seems too preoccupied with his self-assured design to consider complex semantic implications of the writing he so beautifully weaves into his artwork.

Can the nuance of historical memory be evoked through generic imagery and stylized type, be it in the restoration monumentalized in a catalogue, or a design gesture of lettering pretending to evoke personal trauma? The paradox of each rests in the fact that both use the traditionally subversive, illegitimate act to endorse design choices. And both are highly effective as acute visual statements. The authenticity and ethics of either, however, need to be critically positioned in relation to the specificity of the place whose memory (and history) they purport to represent. In a sensitive representation, there should be no need for verbalization of the obvious. The material surface of the ruined city spoke expressively of its pain, without the need for alphabetic translation and rhetorical props of stylised letters. And a close reading of an image of inscription adds a layer of complexity to a difficult procedure of deciphering contextual references and significance. This is a challenge that a designer may want to avoid – eschew him/herself and intentionally minimize it for the viewer – by opting for treating graffiti as a design gesture and history as a design prop. A critical reader, however, must not. Sebald spoke eloquently of that challenge and the deep meaning of images implicated and embedded in the recall of past events, “attesting to acute visual situations.”²⁴

Graffiti is seductively photogenic, it is open to many compositional possibilities, and it promises the thrill of apprehending a fleeting expression and an individual gesture. Its paradox lies in the ways it resists representation in an image: once freeze-framed, its original grounding in the marked surface is compromised.²⁵ Without the material link and temporality contained in the fragile surface connection, graffiti becomes something else: a detached rhetorical tool. Once an inscription is transposed into an image – whether in a designed script, a photograph, or an

exhibition – it becomes something else: an aesthetic statement or a record set within the new frame.²⁶ Carefully selected and re-produced on the pages – through intricate drawings and powerful close-ups that examine the trace of chalk on the grain of the sandstone – the graffiti is transformed into a different site of display. It attains a different deictic power; It points to something else.

A graffito is a manifestation of the uniqueness, it is an unrepeatable mark. Like a signature, it is “simultaneously familiar and exceptional.”²⁷ It is explicitly present in its material context retaining an emotion of an individual hand engaged in furtive writing. It designates its particular context, marking a spatial entity with the temporal dimension of a specific trace. It creates what Michel de Certeau considered to be a place, an entity that is “marked, opened up by memory.”²⁸ The power of a graffiti mark rests in its authenticity, in its immediate affinity to a specific moment, its “seismographic”, as it were, act of recording the emotion contained in a particular gesture. This specificity is hardly abstractable, if after James J. Gibson, we consider a graphic mark a fundamental act of surface manipulation.²⁹ In such an act, the shape and power of the letters are immanently linked to the materiality of both the tool and the surface, as well as the discrete gesture with its intentional and emotional content.

Graffiti inscriptions contain complex tensions: between a desired permanence of broadcast and their acknowledged instability of presence; between their vulnerable position – so open to replacement and writing over – and the relative solidity of their supportive surface and between the individual gesture of marking and the public nature of presentation. These tensions are played out against the specific context of display. Graffiti is site-specific even if its placement may seem arbitrary;³⁰ it attaches itself parasitically to the particular site at the very moment it appears. The choice of location is deliberate, governed by numerous criteria of visibility, accessibility and related danger and fame potential associated with the act. By taking place, graffiti designates its context by marking a spatial entity with the temporal dimensions of a personal trace. By *taking place*, it also makes itself public and thus vulnerable to the elements, exposed to a chance apprehension.

A presence inscribed into a public place, a graphic witness to an event, a trace of an expressive gesture, graffiti is most often a visual shout, rarely a whisper or a matter-of-fact testimonial. It is there to be noticed. The missive may be addressed to a particular audience, but it is also greedy for the attention of a chance viewer. This loud assertion of a personal voice against the rules of the public place needs the materiality of the surface wall to make its presence visible, to make its cry linger after its author has left the scene.

It is the **where** of graffiti, or more specifically, the **here** that matters. Graffiti is a marker of presence: a place-specific sign, an equivalent to a linguistic shifter. Even when transposed into an image it retains the power of context-dependency: affixed to another surface it speaks only of its new site of display, but it still proclaims the same message: look here! look at ME! Graffiti is mostly exclamatory: it is an exclamation mark placed on the surface. It uses the surface for visibility, it marks it to make **itself** visible. No matter where it is placed it can only proclaim: look HERE. Look HERE shouts *The Globe and Mail* cover, look at ME says Sir Norman, look at ME cries Tony Blair.

Graffiti is a self-pointing gesture, a cry for attention to itself. But it is a different self every time writing 'changes surfaces'. Every transposition results in a different territorial claim governed by the new place of adherence. And it is this surface attachment of the mark that we need to be attentive to for it holds the immense deictic power. As Brassai³¹ asserted:

Here, everything arises from
The material
As if predetermined by it.

NOTES

¹ Banksy's album *Wall and Piece* came out just before Christmas of 2005. It has been selling briskly since. Some bookstores, such as Borders, displayed it first in the Art History section. Now, many stores, such as Blackwell's and Waterstone's keep the book in their graffiti sections.

² Blair's campaign promoted measures of combating yobbish behaviour and it began in the early 2006. Several British papers run the front page articles illustrated with graffiti images. See *The Daily Telegraph*, Scottish edition, Wednesday, January 11, 2006. pp.1-2. Front page carries the image of Tony Blair cleaning graffiti with a high-powered hose. Also see, *The Guardian*, Wednesday, January 11, 2006, pp. 1-2, the first page image of the police officers with graffiti in the background, and page 27 "Comment and Debate" - Steve Bell's cartoon referencing the spectacular image of Tony Blair cleaning graffiti off a red brick wall during his visit in Swindon.

³ Of course, Britain is not the only place where the graffiti phenomenon and graffiti art have been set in such paradoxical position. In Montreal (Canada) while the municipality employed one of the city's quirkiest graffiti artists to improve the aesthetic quality of the bike paths contracting his very special signature art, the artist, Roadworth, was charged with several counts of misdemeanor for the very work he has been known for. In the winter of 2006 was faced with a prison sentence. See: <http://www.goodreads.ca/reidcooper/>, <http://spacing.ca/art-roadsworth.htm>. At about the same time, Calgary Art Gallery (the main gallery in that booming town of the Canadian West) was running a show *Painting Under Pressure*. Local curators and hip academics were riding high on the street credibility of the sophisticated graffiti art scene in Canada, while blatantly ignoring copyright and intellectual property claims from the graffiti magazine and international graffiti convention *Under Pressure*, as well as dismissing a number of major ethical questions posed by some of the material used in the exhibit. Of course, you will find no press coverage of this issue.

⁴ What is described here is not, of course, a photograph that accompanied the press release. With the exhibition's installation completed, graffiti faded into the background, into its role as wallpaper. What is described here, then, are merely "flicks", the shots taken by the artist proud of his "piece" and part of "installation documentation" that the CCA routinely collects. To view the image, see: Chmielewska, Ella, "Framing [Con]Text: Graffiti and Place" p. 146, *Space and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007: 145-169.

⁵ Roy Harris, *Rethinking Writing*. London: Continuum, 2001.

⁶ Paul Carter, *Material Thinking*. Melbourne University Press, 2004.

⁷ Berlin, and particularly its west-facing surface of the no longer extant dividing wall has contributed to the graffiti's myth of freedom and unrestrained individual expression, of its associations with democratic ambitions.

⁸ Steven Heller and Mirko Ilic in their book on the position of handwritten mark in the age of digital design, discuss the roots of handwritten mark yet, astonishingly, they do not mention the influence of visibility of graffiti in various mediated forms on the renewed popularity of a handwritten mark in design. Steven Heller and Mirko Ilic, *Handwritten: Expressive Lettering in the Digital Age*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004.

⁹ Paris graffiti of '68, New York subway art of the 70s and the Berlin wall until 1989 combine into an amalgam of aesthetic protest, "graphically raw," stylistically crude and "resolutely awkward" form that fuses image and text, the messiness of its lines and the attitude towards the material surface, all conspiring to create the paradox of graffiti. While often used as a design idiom, it is afforded minimal reflection. In the current design milieu, as Heller and Ilic claim (Ibid.), after reducing the history of handwritten graphics to a quick run – most handwritten work is not so much about polemic as it is a formalist response to digital perfection. As "a vernacular's vernacular", then, graffiti is mined for its power, exploited as an empty sign, a toy chest that could be filled in with any kind of meaning we may want. (Ibid., p.8).

¹⁰ Rick Poynor, *Typographica*. Newhaven: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002:71.

¹¹ The February 22, 2003 issue of BOOKS, *The Globe and Mail's* (a Canadian English-language nationally distributed newspaper) weekend supplement. The credits provided on page 2 indicate CORBIS/MAGMA and Cinders McLeod/*Globe and Mail*.

¹² See the discussion of inscription as fundamental graphic mark, James J. Gibson, *Senses Considered as Perceptual System*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966, p. 229.

¹³ Telephone conversations with the designer and The Globe and Mail Art Director on March 25-27, 2003.

¹⁴ Authored by Norman Foster, Frederick Baker and Deborah Lipstadt. Photographs by Reinhard Görner. David Jenkins (Ed) *The Reichstag Graffiti/ Die Reichstag-Graffiti*. Berlin: jovis Verlag GmbH/Foster and Partners, 2003. Foster provides an introduction (10-13), Frederick Baker, a detailed essay on the history of The Reichstag and its graffiti (16-37), Deborah Lipstadt, the Afterward (118-121).

¹⁵ See names of places: Grozny p. 69, Warsaw p. 112, Lviv p. 100, also Tehran p.110.

¹⁶ Yalta and Tehran are mentioned on p. 27, though the consequences of Yalta for Stalin's territorial marking of Europe and for his later blockade of Berlin and its division are not dwelled upon.

¹⁷ Sources used for support of the historical arguments are at times astonishing. See, for example, the references to 1949 film *The Fall of Berlin* (28). This filmic glorification of Stalin, was clearly inspired by Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and presented a massive rewriting of history attempted at the time of Berlin's blockade. It is perplexing to see this Stalinist propaganda material enjoying uncritical print space in a publication on the piece of art whose main goal is stated as "provision of living history" to German democratic nation.

¹⁸ Deborah Lipstadt, specializing in the examination of the Holocaust denial, closes the book with a powerful argument against the "inconvenient history" and in a way closes off a possibility for considering a number of other awkward histories that Reichstag is immersed in. Warsaw ghetto appearing in the Afterward is the only mention of places to the East of Reichstag whose histories have been shadowed by the long presence of Cyrillic letters and the Red Army flags in the symbolic landscapes marked on the victorious Soviet journey.

¹⁹ Ibid. See, for example quotations marking each of the sections of the book/ clusters of graffiti inscriptions pp. 38, 57, 70, 85, 103.

²⁰ Each of the four Allied powers was represented by a work

of art and Foster's design was the British contribution. Since the graffiti has become part of an art work, it is integral to the design and as such protected by Foster's artistic copyright. Now, "[t]o clean the walls would be the equivalent of painting over part of the canvas" (13, 36).

²¹ See the cover of Stephen Barber, *Extreme Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001.

²² Viewed from Warsaw, the project of restoration of Soviet markings on Reichstag looks highly problematic. Warsaw carries the scars of the both the 1939 Nazi and Soviet alliance, conveniently overlooked in the chronology of the war events set out in the book, as well as the scars of the consequences of the Soviet Victory. But few walls in the city are left to remember. See: Chmielewska, Ella, Framing [Con]Text: Graffiti and Place. *Space and Culture*, 10 , 2, 2007: 145-169.

²³ Sebald begins his discussion of the destruction of German cities by evocation of the destruction of Warsaw.

²⁴ Ibid., back cover.

²⁵ See the discussion of the relation of graffiti and photography: Ella Chmielewska, "Framing Temporality: Montreal graffiti in Photography", Annie Gerin and James McLean (Eds), *Off Base: Contemporary Perspectives on Canadian Public Art*. University of Toronto Press, 2008. In press.

²⁶ Fraenkel, Beatrice. In A-M, Christin (Ed), *A History of Writing: From hieroglyph to multimedia*. (Paris: Flammarion, 2002): 315-17.

²⁷ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988): 106.

²⁸ James J. Gibson. *Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. (New York, 1973).

²⁹ I am using the terms "site-specific" and "place-specific" based on Edward Casey's distinction of site and place: "place brings with it the very elements sheared off in the planiformity of site: identity, character, nuance, history." See Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): xiii.

³⁰ Brassai. *Graffiti*. transl. David Radzinowicz (Paris: Flammarion, 2002): 152.