

# Writing on the Walls of Cyberspace

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## Abstract

*This paper documents an experiment in visualizing virtual space using metaphoric and literal information. A web site combines “unofficial communication”—non-commercial messages and images in public spaces—with data-determined space. The visual form “maps” and juxtaposes physical and conceptual “locations” of individual works, their makers, and visitors to the site.*

## 1. “Unofficial Communication” and the Significance of Location

*It has been said that there are three rules in real estate. 1. Location. 2. Location. 3. Location.*

The same is true of graffiti and other forms of public unofficial communication. An artifact’s location is often more important than its content. It does not necessarily have to be legible to be “read” as successful. The success is in placing a highly visible message in a particular place where it might last for a period of time before being erased by the authorities, time, or a more aggressive writer.

My definition of unofficial communication is any visual or verbal message placed in the public landscape, without the support of an official organization, for non-commercial purposes. Examples are: graffiti, “illegal” murals, defacements, stencils, stickers, train symbols, and “war-chalking.” War chalking (a system of chalked graffiti that shares information about the availability of free Internet connectivity via wireless access points) is a relatively new form that relies completely on location to communicate its message.

Economic trade is usually the context for discussing international exchange. “Globalization,” with its financial emphasis, makes people fear that local cultures might disappear as easily as European currency. At the same time that a handful of multinational corporations control most of the world’s commercial media, unofficial communication travels around the world outside the constraints and elaborate infrastructure of commerce.

Widely regarded as transgressive, but practiced throughout the world, ubiquitous graffiti challenges rules of property ownership by claiming all space as public space. The more commercially and culturally valuable the property, the more desirable it is as an unofficial communication site.

As a pioneer graffiti writer from New York told me, “Graffiti is not always political, but the act of writing graffiti is political.” Leaving a mark in public without permission is an act of personal authority, although many would say “anarchy.” The act verifies the creator’s existence to those who would otherwise ignore or be unaware of that existence. When graffiti-covered trains first rolled down to Manhattan—the

capital of Western capitalism—from the Bronx in New York City decades ago, their messages crossed a previously inviolate boundary of space and socio-economic location.

What does location mean in a time of translocalism—when culture and meaning seem to be portable and ephemeral rather than rooted in space and time? How can a site-specific artifact change its location and retain its original significance? I wanted to see if an image of unofficial communication could be placed on a web site, in a non-location—a virtual space—and *acquire* meaning rather than losing it through disconnection from its original environment.

When I was in Paris for ISEA in 2000, I saw the most shocking piece of graffiti I had encountered after months of documentation. It was shocking, not because of its content, but its location—on a prominent Henry Moore sculpture (titled *Écoute* [listen]) in the middle of Les Halles.



Figure 1. Left image shows red graffiti tag on Henry Moore sculpture, *Écoute*, Les Halles, Paris, December 2000. Right images shows same tag on Harlem store gate, June 2001.

Seeing the huge vandalized sculpture forced me to confront my own middle-class reflexive horror at the audacity of defacing a famous sculpture in a crowded Parisian tourist area. My reaction must have been the way commuters in New York City felt in the 1970s to see a fully painted subway train for the first time. Location is the most defining attribute of a piece of graffiti. The writer wanted to prove that no location is sacred.

“O’clock 156” was the perpetrator’s tag (graffiti name). I had been in Paris in December. Six months later, I was in Harlem, in New York City, photographing store gates on Malcolm X Boulevard. I had seen the “o’clock 156” tag around New York, uptown and downtown—on stickers, doorways and mailboxes. I recognized the European style “1.” Could it be the same person who wrote both tags? Did writers ever appropriate someone else’s tag? The writers I talked to said that using another person’s tag is dangerous.

Then I saw, on the bottom of a metal store gate, the answer to the mystery! Near O’clock’s name, in the same handwriting, were the words “Paris” and “Harlem.” The semiotic and formal impressions of the tags were vastly different in the two locations, but it was important to the writer to identify locations of his work and verify his presence.

These unofficial artifacts constitute a media channel with a traveling transmitter—broadcasting stories about the people who are compelled to communicate and leave their marks in this way. In the graffiti culture, there are myriad web sites set up and maintained by individuals and organizations internationally. People who cannot travel can experience unofficial communication outside of their particular location. Do these web sites further dislocate an artifact from a particular cultural context or accomplish translocation—non-assimilated, culturally intact “immigration”?

According to Arjun Appadurai, author of *Modernity at Large*, “... site, situation and situatedness are of paramount importance in the globalized world in which we now live. But we need to avoid assuming that sites are the same as communities or that localities are simply geographical locations.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Inherent Visualization Problem

The problem in representing site-specific works on the World Wide Web is separating them from their location and, consequently, a large part of their meaning. I decided that is inevitable and unsolvable, but perhaps I could find ways to enhance the artifacts’ communication to diverse audiences through information not available in the material world. As always, the challenge in new media is to articulate ideas in ways possible *only* through technological capabilities like interactivity, changeability, and non-linear navigation.

Like all new media artists, I struggle with the idea of interactivity. The word itself is an oxymoron at best in a medium that does not easily accommodate real time and space interaction.

Soliciting stories from remote “reporters” in various locations provides much of the meaningful and structural content—as well as interactivity—in the site. This symbiotic relationship with viewers requires redefining my role from a sole creator to a curator of a cultural collection. Creating the site in this way simulates a worldwide conversation (non-commercial globalization) with constantly changing participants.

I realize now that using only my own collected data would have ignored the vast resource of other people’s critically important and varied “local” points of view. Rather than just a static, searchable repository of observations and records, the site itself is an additional artifact and changing part of the story. It is a living organism, taking advantage of the Web’s dynamic—although limited—interactive capabilities.

Unofficial communication is anthropology, sociology, journalism, literature, art, graphic design, typography, and more. I needed to find a form accommodating to the various lenses focused on this visual and cultural phenomenon.

## 3. A Translocal Solution

The site’s latest iteration uses matrix/maps as the main interfaces, which visualize the artifacts’ conceptual and formal intersections. For example, a map of the world shows markers that indicate sites of artifacts and locations of past and current visitors to the site.

The locations of visitors are recorded in real time, as users input information that is added to a dynamically updated database. Map markers change size based on the number of artifacts or visitors. Regularly refreshing the display from the database information, the program creates new visual forms as

the data changes. The matrix/maps themselves become unofficial communication, using changing data to map people’s actions in the site from various locations.

To add to the site’s documentation, visitors can submit photos, dates and annotations through an online form. I evaluate the information and determine its most meaningful location within the site’s structure, then add it manually.

The next level of the interface maps sets of attributes, in a visual form that looks like a semantic differential chart. On one end of a line is a word such as “benign.” On the other end is “angry,” with “political” in the middle. Points on the line situate particular artifacts on this perceptual continuum between “benign” and “angry.” Clicking on a point brings the user to another level of images that are at that cognitive “location” on this line.

My input as an artist is to construct the framework of these attribute maps and categorize the artifacts based on my observations and information received from others. I am imposing a conceptual and formal order on the thousands of images and stories collected in the site.

The technological marvel of easily rearranging discrete location-bound artifacts in relation to each other in one virtual “location” is the core of the “Unofficial Communication” site. Moving between physical and virtual space, using location and dislocation to tell different stories about the same objects is the site’s basic concept. Some of the stories are journalistic and documentary in form. Some are literary and metaphoric. All are visual.

The site juxtaposes conceptual and formal structure for two reasons. The first is to encourage semiotic reading of “objective” information. Viewers can decide whether formal attributes have meaning when they are arbitrarily situated next to words with more specific connotations. The fact that a writer chose to use the color red could have semiotic meaning or red might have been the only color of paint available. A continuum showing the key locations “upper class,” “middle class,” and “working class/poor” is next to “yellow,” “red,” and “blue.” The viewer has to consider the relationship between the two sets of words.

The second reason for moving between cognitive modes (literal and figurative) is to create purely formal categories that highlight an artifact’s pure aesthetic and literary qualities. A specific calligraphic flourish or careful choice of word gets the attention it deserves.

Visitors access the individual artifacts by clicking into sub-menus containing larger views of the actual works, annotations, video, and multimedia stories. The structure of the site, organized as a hierarchy of maps, literally reinforces the idea that there is no one way to look at these works. At the macro level, the site points out masses of activity (online and in the physical world) by location. At the micro level, visitors can find specific details about any one piece in the site (including that essential location) reported by someone who was actually there.

The “Unofficial Communication” web site is a living, global and translocal collaborative archive that respects location while simultaneously attempting to transcend it.

## Reference

- [1] Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Public Worlds, V. 1)*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN. 1996.
- [2] *Unofficial Communication* web site. <http://www.digidiva.net/uc>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.translocation.at/d/appadurai.htm>