

# CYBISM AND DECODING THE LETTER: BUILDING AFRO-FUTURIST STYLED GAME LAYERS ON TOP OF THE WORLD

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The realm of street art is now a thriving knowledge culture that merges specialized forms of representation: alphabets, drawings, paintings, films/videos, choreographic notations based on programming languages, hardware, software, etc. This paper examines these guideposts that provide a basis for user-generated, performative, virtual and physical site-specific content that cross multiple disciplines and dimensions on emergent game platforms.



*Fig. 1. Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Battle Station, 2011, studio installation, Photo credit: N. Gaskins (author).*



*Fig. 2. Alternate Futures: Afrofuturist Multiverses & Beyond, 2010, virtual 3D Gothic Futurism simulation, Copyright N. Gaskins (author).*



Fig. 3. *Graffiti Analysis, 2011, personal tag, Copyright N. Gaskins (author).*

*“Every new technology disrupts the previous rhythms of consciousness.” – Joseph Nechvatal [1]*

To walk into the *Art in the Streets* exhibition at Geffen Contemporary in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo neighborhood is to enter the 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, graffiti, films/videos, choreographic notations based on symbolic, linguistic and scientific formulations, programming languages, hardware (robotics, handheld devices), software, and so on. [2] This work emerged from a culture that has grown through the 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. These artists use the urban environment as their canvas that provides a basic framework to contextualize and evaluate street art production. This article expands upon art and media-related discourse of a kind of ontology, or metaphysics of presence to describe what takes place with the body, itself, not just the body that is embedded in public spaces but also how bodies are coded by society. A code is a rule for converting a piece of information (letter, word, phrase, or gesture) into another form or representation (one sign into another sign), not necessarily of the same type. This article aims to present a deeper, multi-layered translation of afro-futuristic, “wildstyle” graffiti and performance decoded through embodied new media, virtual 3D and augmented reality environments.

Modern graffiti and street art pioneers, many whose works are featured in *Art in the Streets* and elsewhere have provided artistic guideposts fueled by the increasing ubiquity of digital media that offer opportunities for its users to deviate from canonical practices of art and represent a complex syntheses of scientific and technological extensions of the body embedded in material and virtual spaces. RAMMELZEE was an artist and theorist who lived for twenty years in a Tribeca studio loft he nicknamed the *Battle Station*. [Fig. 1] Museum curators transported his studio to the Geffen Contemporary for public viewing. *Battle Station* contains rarely seen video, sculpture, images and sound. It is part of what the artist

called “gothic futurism,” his urban, afro-futurist manifesto that embeds history, science (quantum physics), philosophy, science fiction, mathematics and technology. [3] The centerpiece of this production is “Gasholeer,” an upright, freestanding urban warrior figure covered in armor worn by RAMMELLZEE during live performances. “Gasholeer” represents this graffiti artist in his futuristic, urban realm – merging urban bricolage and detritus, mass media and street culture. The artist, embodied as an avatar, is surrounded by customized instruments and systems called “letter racers,” “monster models,” and “garbage gods” – objects designed to decode information into specialized forms of representation and invite visitors to become immersed in material and metaphysical space endlessly open to transformation and change. [4]

Modern graffiti comes from anywhere and takes whatever is needed from the environment. This practice relies on sign relations that consist of specialized art forms (tags, burners, etc.) that also describe aspects of presence, objects of reference and mental representations of spatial perception. RAMMELLZEE’s artworks consist of formulations on the juncture between black and Western sign systems (afro-futurism). [5] He realized that concepts are tools – technologies that could be crafted outside of the canon to make palpable specialized forms of knowledge that push the means of artistic production into the hands of outsider artists. His “panzerized” art forms, as cultural 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 society. RAMMELLZEE was part of a movement to create a space in which to untangle lines that cut across the past, present and future to establish an empirical framework. This framework is semiotic insofar as its structure depends on the process of perception and experience. Such development has largely been unexplored in scholarly discourse and is open for interrogation and debate. In her analysis Andrea Mubi Brighenti asserts that the common denominator that runs through graffiti, as an interstitial practice, is the materiality of the practice itself. [6] This article proposes a new form of analysis and interpretation based on the creation of new and alternative media content.

RAMMELLZEE appropriated and decoded letters of the Greek alphabet to create distinctly new art objects, transforming classic signature visual motifs into mechanical (letter racer) systems. Second Life (SL), an online, virtual 3D world, offers tools to re-appropriate and re-mix similar artistic constructions. As part of a Second Life art exhibition sponsored by the IBM Center for Social Media, I simulated portions of *Battle Station* and, through the use of in-world tools, constructed objects that were textured and assembled to simulate modern graffiti semiotics. [Fig. 2] Built into the SL software is a three-dimensional modeling tool based around simple geometric shapes that allows artists to build virtual objects. There is also a procedural scripting language, Linden Scripting Language, which can be used to add interactivity to objects. Users/avatars navigated this wildstyle-inspired, perceptually immersive 3D graffiti by virtually walking on, through, or around the objects, some of which were scripted to provide information such as links to external web sites and note cards with text that could be stored in an inventory. Extruding two-dimensional graffiti and incorporating interactive elements reveals new ways to decode specialized forms of representation that break set rules and establish new practices that extend viewer/user participation.

Imagine how much richer and multi-layered the experience of being in *Battle Station* could have been – exploring wildstyle graffiti and street art forms – using augmented reality (AR) tools on mobile devices. Visitors would have experienced a different *Art in the Streets* exhibition (at MOCA LA) if, while using their iPhones or Android smartphones to capture images, they had access to AR content that translated RAMMELLZEE’s complex vernacular. This multi-layered scenario is what makes virtual 3D and augmented reality environments promising for contemporary art. Graffiti artists, as part of a production process, encode, or take information from subcultural experiences, living in urban spaces and converting

this psychogeography into specialized symbols (graffiti tags, dance poses). Virtual 3D and AR tools can decode these symbols, as part of a generative and reverse artistic process, converting various symbols into information understandable by others. Emerging technologies create layers of information that explore the far-reaching implications of evolving epistemology and empiricism based on the body as a site for communication, represented in material and virtual domains and by highly stylized structures and code.

Along with the development of perceptually immersive, virtual 3D worlds like Second Life, augmented reality (AR) is becoming more accessible and new uses continue to emerge as tools for creating and customizing applications become easier to use. The layering of information over 3D space produces new ways to experience the world, as blended reality, that is fueling the broader migration of computing from the desktop to the mobile device, bringing with it opportunities for broader viewer/user dynamic engagement with social, digital, and mobile media. Contemporary artists are being encouraged to view their mobile phones, cameras, iPods and tablet computers as tools for production and display. These tools can be used to simulate real world issues and explore complex concepts in ways that are more 'user led' and increasingly participatory and collaborative. Graffiti psychogeography reveals creative practices that twist, interlock, converge and diverge media texts in a type of rhizomaniac, capitalistic and cultural schizophrenia. [7] Wildstyle, 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. [8]

Evan Roth's *Graffiti Analysis* is one of several virtual graffiti applications that utilize motion and marker tracking, computer vision technology and programming to record and analyze graffiti art. The artists' gestures are captured, processed and used to generate projections and overlays that appear on the surfaces of structures in physical spaces. [Fig. 3] Here, complex graffiti vernacular is represented in the language of information analysis, offering a system for greater understanding of a highly coded form of creative expression. [9] This development 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." [10] As defined and coined by artist-theorist Joseph Nechvatal, cybism is a "new sensibility emerging in art respecting the integration of certain aspects of science, technology and consciousness – a consciousness struggling to attend to the prevailing current spirit of our age." [11] Nechvatal claims that cybism can be used to characterize our understanding of where cultural space is developing today. His notion blends the virtual and augmented with the analog to be used as a theoretical basis for newly imagined realities that merge in cybism.

This development merely scratches the surface of what is possible with new and alternative media technologies and further expands the scope of experimental critical media theory. Performance and motion capture, blended reality, and wildstyle abstraction reflects an evolving knowledge culture (graffiti, breakdancing, b-boying) that employs verbal, written, artistic, or performative representations of media in the body. Doze Green's paintings translate complex metaphysical concepts that resonate with urban futurism, such as the "possible manipulation of energy and matter to create a timeless space." [12] Bodies in motion effortlessly translate into symbolic, linguistic and spatial formulations. The performative language of graffiti – windup, tilt, float and freeze – generates dance poses and letters that are manipulated into recognizable forms. Graffiti is represented in the language of information analysis. "King of Style" Kase 2 enabled a whole generation of artists to break from traditional forms into a more modern complex lettering system based on computer technology. Artists and writers who copied and amended each other's designs devised a variety of methods. Freelance hacker Josh Nimoy designed a Kase 2-inspired brush style for Graffiti Research Lab's L.A.S.E.R. tag system.

Futura (formerly Futura 2000) was one of the first graffiti artists to translate the wildstyle aesthetic into other art forms as a synthetic purification and intensification of certain ideas and visual elements. 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. Cultural catalysts and practitioners have charted the development of modern graffiti, from the subway system to new media systems. Futura writes, "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." [13] Futura is describing the emergence of a "cybistic zeitgeist" that seeks to capture specific aspects of graffiti and street art in order to formulate new inscriptions and representations (layers) that can be built upon and worked with to expand creative expression and innovation, through the use of game and mobile technologies. The acquisition of this work is epistemically advantageous and can facilitate a broader understanding that extends to electronic art and emerging, experimental game technologies.

The Modern Museum of Art (MoMA) interviewed artist Lee Quinones who discusses the development of the graffiti artist's signature (tag). [14] Quinones demonstrates on paper RAMMELLZEE's complex process of abstracting letterforms and transforming them into systems that have influenced contemporary graffiti artists such as SEEN, TWIST, AMAZE, KETONE, JONONE and KATSU who have had their tags captured and saved as Graffiti Markup Language (GML) files, a digital standard used by *Graffiti Analysis* and other applications. *Tagged in Motion* synchronizes gestural movement with an augmented layer of laser graffiti tags. This augmented reality performance combines graffiti art and its virtual 3D representation. Equipped with a handheld augmented reality tool, artist DAIM sprays graffiti into empty space. 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. [15] *TagDis* is an iPhone app that lets its users design graffiti and street art using Augmented Reality technology. [16] Players see their tags – and those of other players – in the real world. This development will continue to converge on emergent game platforms, some of which will continue to expand the potentiality of new media to solve real problems, map specialized art forms and bring together disparate communities that share an interest in these systems, whether found in code, museums, or on the street.

A case study for real world problem solving is the *Graffiti Grapher* application created by Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). [17] Ethno-mathematician Ron Eglash and his computing team developed this web-based applet that uses graffiti artifacts and artistic practices as a means to engage learners in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) concepts. *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 Georgia Institute of Technology's Experimental Game Lab and by the GVU Center's Augmented Environments Lab (AEL). [18]

Experimental, emergent game-related technologies are the next layer of development and require careful investigation. This presentation reveals resonances of a thriving knowledge culture on emerging, experimental game technologies. It is a multi-faceted attempt to position this production in a 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, street art in the next phase of conceptual and technological innovation to inform a more meaningful

critical theory of epistemic culture that is responsive to empiricism and constituted by models of recognition and reflection.

### **References and Notes:**

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