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The cathartic function of drawing where you shouldn't

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Abstract

The online, or digital/virtual, learning environment is commonly described in spatial and geographical terms, being treated like a landscape or ecology itself, a space in which learning activities occur. While useful for framing VLEs, such broad comparisons also appear highly reductive, excluding fringe or contested practices. In this provocation the author comments on how the doodling activity of students in online spaces during the pandemic, echoes and resonates with graffiti art that exists in the exterior environment. The aesthetic practice of graffiti, when applied in digital learning spaces, offers a method of reterritorializing VLEs and catharsing learning spaces for both students and staff.

Keywords

online learning; digital learning; graffiti; belonging; drawing; catharsis

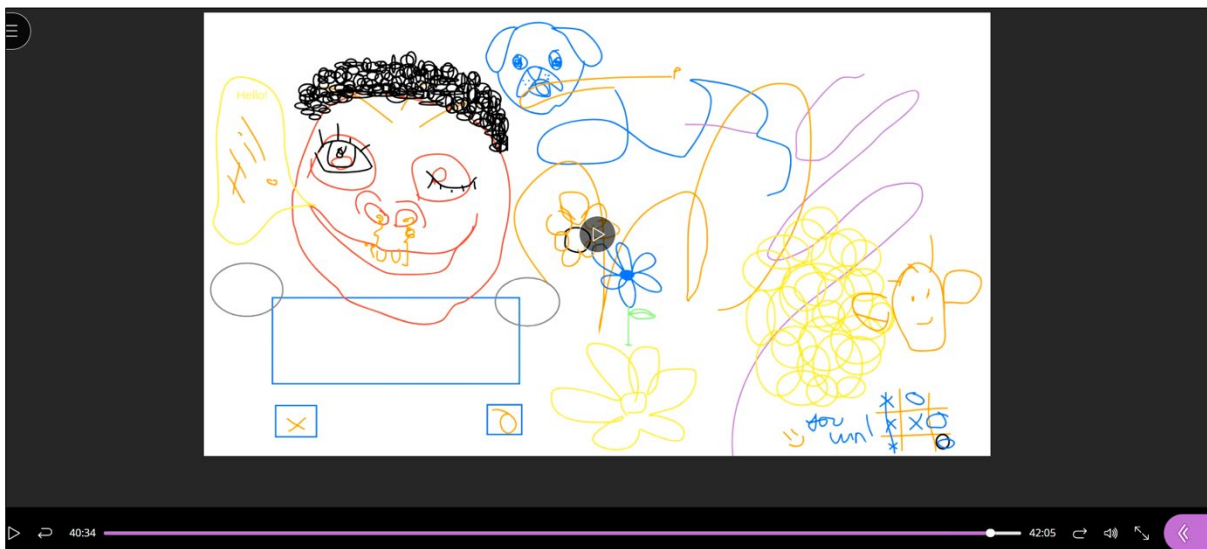


Figure 1: Faces, Animals, Flowers and Games. Image: Spurr (2020).

Introduction

During the first two lockdowns in 2020, my colleague, Tom Davidson and I (working as part of the Academic Support team at London College of Fashion) transferred all our workshop teaching online. Emotions from both staff and students were fraught during this time, with uncertainty, anxiety and concern evident in many online interactions and teaching. This was often accompanied with a sense of frustration around learning in digital spaces not being 'what I signed up for'. Such an environmental shift, pedagogically, was undeniably disruptive and unsettling for all.

Along with the move towards digital spaces, limited environmental engagement occurred, in line with government regulations around curtailed outside activity. Fortunately, I live near Regent's Canal, Paddington and Grand Union Canal sections and would frequent these, sometimes daily. These walks provided essential personal 'outside' time, and moments of reflection and introspection.

Increasingly, these walks would also begin to influence my own teaching activity and conception of the digital space and environment.



Figure 2: Half Penny Steps. Graffiti on the north wall of the footbridge. Image: Spurr (2021).



Figure 3: Grand Union Canal, adjacent to Trellick Tower. Image: Spurr (2021).

Walks

It was during these walks that I noticed the considerable amount of graffiti art that covered large sections of the central and western canal sections, juxtaposed against green spaces, traditional tenement and mansion houses, modern housing and tower blocks. Materials and design for the different buildings followed no particular logic or rationale, with different historical styles sitting comfortably next to one another, along with different modes of living and working visible in the barges that line the water. Such an environment seems inherently fluid and dynamic, but also romantic and inspiring. There is a common element across all these spaces though, something that cares nothing for the provenance or history of the surface it covers: graffiti. The more I walked, the more I realised that graffiti added a unique textural element to many of these spaces both enlivening and challenging the environment; arguably countering the troubling polarised definition, which lies anywhere between decentred art form or mindless vandalism.

The aesthetic quality of (most of) the graffiti was unquestionable to me, sometimes comforting, sometimes demanding, sometimes nonsensical. During this time it created the political realisation that art can exist in spaces it is not meant to be, and that by existing outside of 'institutional' spaces it actively destabilises the normal power structures involved in the exhibition of art, and who and what constitutes 'art' and 'artists', and also what constitutes the canvas itself. As Bates suggests,

This fascination is hardly a recent phenomenon. Prehistoric etchings and cave paintings are indicative of humankind's efforts to communicate, using symbols to represent landmarks or tribal boundaries. These petroglyphs are found worldwide, dating as far back as 40,000 years. While this manner of communication was socially sanctioned and therefore differs from the illegal nature of present day graffiti, it is interesting to note that the etymology of graffiti is from the Italian "graffiare" meaning "to scratch". The term "graffiti" came to light in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries to describe the etchings found on the walls in Pompeii. (Bates, 2014, p.24)



Figure 4: Solo. Image: Spurr (2021).



Figure 5: RIP and MAC10. Image: Spurr (2021).



Figure 6: Geographical and Textural intersections. Image: Spurr (2021).

The inscription of spaces that were not meant to be inscribed' could and did provide a cathartic function on my walks. Many of these walks would turn into active explorations of new 'pieces': Regent's Canal saw an explosion of graffiti during lockdown, most likely enabled by reduced footfall within those areas. As I became more familiar with the graffiti, I increasingly began to feel like I was experiencing an alternative, liminal art exhibition, transposed and inscribed on the environment. As my familiarity with individual pieces or collections increased, so did the affective dimensions of the experience.

Frequently I found myself encountering 'RIP Dad' slogans, with several emerging through the first and second lockdown. This was utterly sobering and a literal inscription of the human, personal and emotional cost of Covid for many of those that experienced it. The act of this being shared in a space that was open to everyone one provided an important act of communion, and there was something very significant about the graffiti as an expressive emotional state emboldened into the very fabric of the space we live. It was a public space for mourning. The graffiti in this instance became a memorial, an inscription of feeling.



Figure 7: A Lonely Trolley. Image: Spurr (2022).

What does this have to do with online teaching?



Figure 8: Merry Christmas Everyone! Image: Spurr (2020).

Whilst teaching a session on reflection and waiting for students to emerge, on a whim, Tom and I suggested that students draw or write whatever they wanted on the slides. It was just a bit of fun to pass the time as we waited for everyone to enter the online session. We envisioned this as a digital doodling space, that would get some of the frustration we were witnessing, out.

Whilst the students began to etch, I remarked on how similar the scratching looked when compared with the graffiti from my walks. As the students scratched their messages, and doodles onto the slides, they began to construct their own virtual graffiti, altering and transforming the conventional and, perhaps, transmissive, space of the online class. The slides became a surface that could have its messages and content rewritten over, in the same manner as the graffiti at the canal. Lannert indicates that,

There is both a deviant and artistic aspect to graffiti art, which produces two different societal reactions. Many people recognize graffiti art as vandalism, gang activity, or a form of rebellion. Simultaneously, graffiti art is also present in galleries, museums, and prized pieces of notable art collections. It is much easier to look at a scribbled name on a dumpster and write it off as vandalism instead of pondering the purpose of that scribbled name. When society limits, redirects, or prohibits an individual's self-expressive outlet, the manifestation of graffiti art often occurs. (Lannert, 2015, p. 48)

Fluctuating permanency

Grffiti differs from more static memorials, in that it generally has a fluctuating permanence. Works can and do disappear rather quickly, sometimes being painted over by the local council, while others remain for years, and others are modified or adapted relatively quickly. Evidently this can create issues, but also provides possibilities: there is a constant tension and battle in the work between visibility and temporality.

One of the most significant pieces I witnessed was a large, roughly 2 metre by 3 metre, brick wall graffiti near Camden, of a cat saying Meow. Within a week or so, it was quickly subject to the work of other artists who tagged over it. The example below shows the change over time of a different wall section near Ladbroke Grove.





Figures 9 and 10: 'Cubs' Covers. Images: Spurr (2021).

Creation, transformation and trust

"Won't they draw a phallus or say something rude?" Admittedly these concerns did cross my mind, but I think this emerged from a general misunderstanding of the inscription as destructive or disrespectful, which again resonates with how graffiti spectrums across art, doodling and vandalism.

But despite all this political juxtaposition, the simple, Zen truth of the entire matter is that graffiti is an act of creation, misinterpreted as an act of destruction.
(Gonnella, 2008)

Every time the students etched something on the virtual environment, they were inscribing feelings and thoughts, providing catharsis in an online learning space that was unfamiliar and possibly quite boring, even institutional.

I stopped writing in any serious sense years ago, but whenever I see a well-placed burner or thoughtful phrase scratched into a bathroom wall, I'm more satisfied than I would ever be staring up at a goddamn billboard. The answer, my friends, is not blowing in the wind. It's written on the fucking wall.
(Gonnella, 2008)

The creative online space, including slides and the screen itself should and can be viewed as something which can be altered or 'interfered' with, and that by allowing students this opportunity, we like some of the graffiti beside the canal, allowed students to inscribe their own narratives, commentaries and art into a visual space where they had typically only had a one-way interaction, but by doing this we were not destroying or disrespecting the space, but imbuing it with something that was both fun, cathartic, and celebratory: a human release of scratching and inscribing, the literal transformation of frustration into a creative act.

If we allow students to engage with material in ways that might be seen as disruptive, we engage in trust, openness, and collaboration with them, and we also importantly allow a cathartic function that can channel frustrations, conflicts, and other tensions into aesthetic outlets. The public nature of graffiti and inscribing of public/digital spaces is deeply communal but the work is always subject to transformation itself, with the possibility of being written or drawn over.

Graffiti also demonstrates the shared ownership of environments and manifests aesthetics where we might not necessarily expect, or even like, but it provides an important cathartic function, as communities and voices not heard communicate their own stories and feelings.

So, I urge you all regarding students and VLES, how can your slides/material be written over, transformed, modified, satirised? And perhaps deep in those inscriptions that can seem trivial we find the human quality, that the digital is sometimes accused of lacking. Graffiti teaches us a significant, even philosophical lesson, as it embodies transformation, and the creative possibilities of disruptive aesthetic transformation. It also, importantly, reminds us that senses of belonging and ownership emerge from involvement and active participation within an environment (whether physical or digital), much like walking along, and even doodling on the surfaces, of a beautiful London Canal.

References

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Biography

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