Space and Culture

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Andrea Mubi Brighenti

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At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain

Andrea Mubi Brighenti[1]

Abstract

The article is based on an ethnographic observation of a crew of graffiti writers in the northeast of Italy. Extending some considerations emerging from the case study, the article advances a reflection on the territorial dimension of graffiti writing in urban environments and the relationship between walls, social relationships and the public domain. This task entails understanding walls as artefacts that are subject to both strategic and tactical uses, as well as the relationship between walls and the public domain as a territorial configuration. In particular, graffiti writing is observed as an interstitial practice that creates its own specific way of using walls: it is a "longitudinal" rather than a "perpendicular" style, which transform the wall into a fragment of a "prolongable" series, a part of a continuing conversation.

Keywords

urban environments, walls, graffiti writing, territory, visibility, public domain

This article advances a reflection on human territoriality and social territory-making capacity in relationship to urban public space. The case study that substantiates such reflection is provided by an ethnographic observation carried on in 2006 inside a crew of signature graffiti writers located in the northeast of Italy (Brighenti & Reghellin, 2007). More specifically, the article attempts to provide a conceptualization of the uses of walls in public urban places as an instance of territorial formations. It is contended that territorology, the science of such territorial formations, includes a study of the boundary-making activities that draw territories and aims to understand the consequences of the existence of wholly social territories. Boundaries are specifically conceptualized as thresholds introduced in the field of visibility, and economies of visibility are interpreted as economies of public attention. Ultimately, this amounts to raising a basic question about the nature of public space: What is precisely *public* in public space?

[1]University of Trento, Trento, Italy

Corresponding Author:
Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Department of Sociology, University of Trento, via Verdi, 26
38122, Trento, Italy
Email: andrea.brighenti@soc.unitn.it

Graffiti Writing as an Interstitial Practice

Signature graffiti writing can be characterized, in short, as a practice that consists of producing legal or illegal drawings and writings in specific public places using acrylic spray cans (Chmielewska, 2007; Ferrell, 1996; Halsey & Young, 2006; Lachmann, 1988; Phillips, 1999). In the course of 2006, I have co-conducted an ethnography of Overspin, a crew of signature graffiti writers based in Veneto, one of the districts in the northeast of Italy, the other co-researcher being Mr Michele Reghellin, a graffiti practitioner himself. Besides observing Overspin's members, we interviewed some other writers in the cities of Vicenza, Schio, Verona, and Trento, who were not associated with Overspin. The main research aim was to understand how the community of graffiti writers defines itself, and how it traces its own boundaries and defines its own styles vis-à-vis other communities and different practices. Terminologically, it is interesting to note that Italian graffiti writers call themselves precisely "writers," that is, using the English term but pronouncing it |'vrītərs| according to the Italian phonetics. Because of this, in Italy the English term *writing* designates almost exclusively graffiti writing. To respect this usage, in the following I am using "writing" as a shorthand for "graffiti writing."

The representations and the practices of writing can be understood as a social field or semiautonomous social sphere inside which there exist a number of relationally defined positions, a number of specific skills, orientations, dispositions, and attitudes, both at the level of concrete practice and lifestyles adopted by the community. A series of concepts and ideas, which can be investigated through observation and interviews eliciting discursive accounts, are also part of the field of writing and help stabilize or reshape definitions, norms, and values inherent to the practice. Interestingly, the sociological concept of "field" is reminiscent of—although not entirely correspondent to—a term used by writers, as well as, more generally, underground artists, that is, the concept of "scene" (see, e.g., Irwin, 1973 on the Californian surf scene). Just like other artistic underground practices, in the case of graffiti writing a scene is a territorial ensemble of actors dislocated in positions of centrality versus marginality, avant-garde versus retro-garde, relatively differentiated degrees of seniority, militancy and success. Consequently, one of the most important indexes that flags the birth of a social field can be said to be the extent to which value judgments about the artifacts produced by the practice are subtracted from exogenous reference frames and led back to endogenous frames. In other words, within an established social field, the capacity to evaluate—and, even before evaluating, to even give a name to—the artifacts implied in a practice is claimed to belong to the field itself. The members of the community of practice attempt to monopolize it. From this point of view, the argument advanced by Bourdieu (1993) about the field of cultural production can be applied to the field of graffiti writing, insofar as language plays a crucial role in the definition of a social field. Language reveals the power to nominate the phenomena that are relevant or, in other words, "visible" to the group. Conversely, linguistic fluctuations in the designation and characterization of facts are symptomatic signs of weakness in the constitution of a specific field.

Graffiti writing is a field whose definition is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is difficult to identify its boundaries. Writing interacts and often overlaps and interweaves with the fields of other practices. It cannot always be clearly separated from a number of other practices, including art and design (as aesthetic work), criminal law (as vandalism crime), politics (as a message of resistance and liberation), and market (as merchandisable product). Because no official and universally agreed-on definitions of all these boundaries exist, writing appears as an *interstitial practice*. An interstitial practice is precisely a practice about whose definition and boundaries different social actors hold inevitably different conceptions. It is interstitial because, when we look at it from the perspective of one of the different social fields just mentioned, writing seems to be located precisely in a *residuum* of one of those fields. When interrogated from

the point of view of other practices, interstitial practices always answer in a "yes, but. . ." form. You can call writing art: yes, but. . .; you can call it crime: yes, but. . . And it is in this epistemic sense, well before any political attitude or legal definition, that interstitial practices should be understood as "resistant": although they cannot fully establish their own social field, they likewise cannot be successfully reduced to other established fields. Complementarily, it can also be argued that "interstitiality" is the effect of the porosity of all social fields' boundaries or, with Foucault, the result of the "capillarity of power." The only common denominator that runs through an interstitial practice is the materiality of the practice itself. In the case of writing, it is a spray can and a surface to be painted. An interstice thus defined also shares some resemblances to an "ecological niche" as understood, for instance, by Gibson (1979), in the sense that a niche embraces a set of heterogeneous objects, such as artifacts, shapes, textures, tendencies, and boundaries that constitute affordances for the animal or organism who populates the environment in question.

As observed above, linguistic fluctuations mirror oscillations in the constitution of the field. In the case of graffiti writing, the point is perfectly exemplified by the stark contrast between autochthonous terms ("bombing," "painting") and allochthonous ones ("staining," "vandalizing"). Everett Hughes's (1958) works on professional cultures remind us that the capacity to define one's own activity according to one's own autochthonous categories is among the key elements for the creation of a professional field. In graffiti writing, autochthonous definitions are explicitly claimed, but at times writers find themselves in the unpleasant position of observing and perceiving their own activity through categorical and terminological lenses that belong to external actors, either because these external actors are institutionally stronger actors (such as the state's legal system and its agencies) or because they are socially more influent actors (such as those who operate in the media, the fashion system, and so on). One of the first Web sites ever dedicated to graffiti writing stressed the gap between different points of view on the same practice keenly choosing the provocative name *Art Crimes*.

In parallel to what Iain Borden (2001) has observed about skateboard, the following aspects of writing should also be stressed: (a) writing is focused on the local space of "the street" and the neighborhood and, at the same time, it is globally proliferated, mediated, and disseminated; (b) writing is constantly legislated against, but counters prosecution with an emphasis on creativity and desire; (c) writing is about gaining proficiency with a specific tool and, at the same time, it involves the whole body of the writer; (d) while, seen from the outside, writing may look like a childish pastime, from the inside it tends to constitute itself as a whole life style; (e) writing regards urban space and architecture not as things but as a set of affordances, as process of production, as experience and event.

Writer's Attitude

The different practices that interact with a wall in situated context are not always easy to distinguish from each other. For instance, advertisement and graffiti writing stand, at first sight, on two almost opposite footings. The first is usually carried on legally by powerful economic actors, the second by unauthorized actors who often operate according to a noncommercial logic. Nonetheless, there are ambiguous mimetic phenomena between these two prima facie antithetical practices. In this context, Anne Cronin (2008) has recently suggested that outdoor advertising and graffiti should be studied together, both in terms of their ubiquity in urban space and their visual impact on urban landscape. Cronin discusses in particular the case of Symbollix, former graffiti writer who turned into a self-proclaimed "advertisement innovator" when he started using stencil to make logos brushing the wall's dirt rather than painting it. Because what one perceives as picture actually the clean part of the wall, Symbollix has managed to venture into a

Figure 1. Police controls at the *Meeting of Styles* convention, Padova, April 2006
Source: Photo by the author (2006).

most subtle twisting of the rationale for the legal ban on graffiti, commonly associated to other forms of urban dirt and antihygienic practices.

Yet my ethnographic observation has led me to the conclusion that in the relationships between writing and criminal law, illegality represents the *zero degree* of the practice of writing. Not only sooner or later have most writers had trouble with the police (Figure 1), they also generally regard "making a train"—that is, sneaking by night into the yards to make a piece on a train's façade—as the true writer's initiation and pedigree (Figure 2). Illegality is regarded by writers as one of the crucial characteristics that differentiate writing from other practices or visual products in the urban landscape. That does not mean that writers always do "illegals," as they call them. On the contrary, most of the actions I witnessed were legal, either at the crew's Hall of Fame (Figure 3), or during graffiti conventions (Figure 4). Nonetheless, writers believe that the more you content yourself with legality and legal arrangements of some sort—for example, public institutions granting you a wall out of town where you can practice, or shopkeepers hiring you to paint their place—the more you become something different from a writer. You may end up doing "art" or "merchandise"— including, *ça va sans dire*, good merchandise—but these are clearly different practices from writing. Even political activism is something writers must distinguish themselves from if they want to save their own practice. Thus, despite the fact that in Italy graffiti writers have been tradi- tionally hosted inside the *centri sociali occupati e autogestiti* squats (most of which, in the northeast of Italy, are associated or even directly controlled by the *disobbendienti* movement), writers do not identify themselves with *centri sociali* at all. With some notable exceptions (like the Carlo Giuliani memorial graffiti in via Bramante in Milan), writers become extremely reluctant when it comes to painting commissioned political subjects.

One can describe graffiti writing as a seduction of crime (Katz, 1990). But one can also regard it as a form of political resistance (Hall, Clarke, & Jefferson, 1976). It can be interpreted as an act of protest against unprivileged conditions, as Butler (2004) does for hip hop culture, or as a form of neotribal aggregation (Maffesoli, 1988). Alternatively, one can appreciate it as a form of aesthetic research, which is positive rather than oppositional. During our interview, Kato commented:

Figure 2. Piece by Secse on a Trenitalia railroad coach; It reads "In the streets, not on the web," June 2006
Source: Photo by the author (2006).

Figure 3. Rode at the Overspin's Hall of Fame in Schio (Vicenza), beginning to sketch, February 2006
Source: Photo by the author (2006).

Figure 4. Overspin's allotted wall at the *Street Fever Convention*, Romano di Lombardia (Bergamo), May 2006
Source: Photo by the author (2006).

Q: Thus, writing makes sense only if it remains illegal. But according to you, does it have
   any oppositional meaning, I mean, against institutions, do you see it as an act . . .

A: Of protest?

Q: Yeah, does it have any such meaning or . . . I mean, a protest against the State, the
   institutions, against . . .

A: No, no, no! I don't think it's against anyone. At the root it's a thing you do 'cause you
   may just want to set a signature . . .

In this vein, Paolins described writing as primarily an "infottamento" (in slang, an uncontrol-lable burn). Similar observations on *jouissance*, excitement, and thrill can be found in other research on graffiti practitioners, notably in Lachmann (1988), Ferrell (1996), Halsey and Young (2006), and Campos (2009).

All these different and apparently antithetical conceptions and interpretations of writing do not automatically exclude each other. On the contrary, it is interesting to observe that, up to a degree, they coexist. But the degree of such coexistence is floating and beyond a certain thresh-old the practice itself would be fatally torn apart—literally, it would split into different practices. Thus, the degree of acceptable divergence must be constantly negotiated and worked upon to guarantee that the interstice in which the practice exists may be sustained. The different motiva-tions that cut across the community of practice also lead to different normative attitudes toward the practice of writing. Crucially, the interplay made of alliances and discrepancies between different motivations affect the boundaries of the practice itself and ultimately strengthen its interstitial nature vis-à-vis art, crime, political action, subculture, research, bodily skill, personal satisfaction, and even psychotic obsession. Taken all together, these dimensions are clearly contradictory. Which one is activated or claimed at which time and by whom is a matter of dif-fering people, situations, encounters, and interactions. That is why people, situations, encounters,

and interactions always make the difference in the constitution of writing as a—stronger or weaker—semiautonomous social field created by practice. To take an example, most writers I have talked to do not reject the idea that their practice is a form of art. Quite the contrary, they often claim it is. But when it comes to face institutional art, or "art that sells," they become much more cautious in endorsing any equivalence between the two activities. Echoing almost literally an Australian graffiti writer interviewed by Halsey and Young (2006), Paolins described writing as a form of "ungovernable art":

> If you want, it's a form of art that is ungovernable. It's done by people who act fooling all rules. If it gets into a museum, it loses 'cause it's no longer instinctive stuff. Then it's just a drawing like any other, who cares if it's done by a writer then. To me, it must remain in the street. It'll always be a trouble, probably. This stuff's around since thirty years and it's there. But as time goes, stuff increases, damage too. If the boys make it, it means there's motivation behind, it ain't just fashion.

An analogous emotional, visceral reaction to graffiti is noticed by Schacter (2008) for both graffiti artists and graffiti removers. Similarly ambiguous are the opinions about other dimensions of this practice. Most notably, the very affiliation of writing to hip hop culture is not something that goes without saying. This is clearly the case in places where competing independent traditions of graffiti writing are present, such as the *pichação* in Brazil (Spinelli, 2007). But even the writers I have observed in Italy do not fully identify themselves with the hip-hop movement. On the one hand, they recognize that graffiti writing is usually described as one of the four main threads in hip-hop culture. Most of them got into graffiti writing inspired by rap music and hip-hop fashion. Yet they also need to secure some form of independence from hip-hop subculture. Independence may, for instance, be expressed in musical taste and dressing code. At the Overspin's Hall of Fame you can hear rock music from the stereo and writers dress "street" rather than specifically hip-hop. The point is that, if you conceive writing as a type of research, you do not want to be constrained by the "stylemes" and clichés of a highly structured subculture. For the members of a crew such as Overspin, you should never predetermine your style because if your stylistic research drains, you are finished. As Kato put it

> Many of those who are *infottati* [crazy] about rap are also inclined to a more conventional view of writing.

There are various opinions circulating among writers about the legitimacy to hit certain types of spaces or surfaces. In this regard, two main orientations emerge: the first one more restrictive, the second one more permissive. For some writers, it is important to impose self-limitations that prevent acting on surfaces like monuments, churches, and private houses. On the contrary, for others no place is sacred. Writers with more restrictive positions sometimes also advance a utilitarian argument in favor of their normative choice:

> It's useless to hit where you're sure it'll be erased almost instantly. Then you've got four bastards who will hit everywhere anyway. . . (Morki)

Moreover, Res argues, hitting indiscriminately is self-defeating in the long run because you lose count of which places are safe and which one are unsafe (patrolled). Incidentally, such confusion is also mentioned as a side effect of writers disrespecting other writers' territory. Usually, though, bombers are not very sensitive to these types of arguments. For instance, Paolins told me

I paint the wall but the house is still workin', right? I haven't . . . The use of the house is you can still live in it, maybe it's just slightly different, aesthetically speaking. I understand you get angry about that, but after all I don't give a damn. Fuck off, I too want my slice of fun in all this shit. I found it like this, too bad for you.

Interestingly, restrictive and permissive attitudes mirror the very process of constitution of the field of writing. More restrictive writers tend to mix endogenous and exogenous categories when they describe the effects of indiscriminate hitting. On the contrary, bombers tend to conceive writing as a wholly constituted and even universal practice. For a bomber, norms about writing should be generated entirely from considerations within the field of writing itself. Because he or she is more interested in securing a place where he or she can draw at ease, a hardcore stylist will also tend to negotiate his or her vision of the practice with other agencies and their respective professional categories. In any case, the essential point remains the degree to which value judgments about the artifacts produced by a practice are subtracted from exogenous reference frames and led back to endogenous frames.

I would now like to link these aspects of graffiti writing to a more general reflection on urban territorialities and the nexus of walls, social relationships and the public domain.

The Place of Walls, Walls as Places

Within urban spatial political economy, walls are governmental objects par excellence. More precisely, governmentality (Foucault, 1978/1991) is really what walls are about. Foucault describes governmentality as comprising three interlocked elements: a set of institutions and procedures for the exercise of power on the population, the emergent historical configuration of such governmental *savoirs*, and the application of these tools to political institutions, in particular the administrative state. Within this broad frame, one can appreciate the fact that walls are planned and built as part of a *strategy* aimed at controlling people and their activities by means of a control of space. A vision, or plan, is at the core of the science of wall building. From the strategic point of view, walls are useful separators. They introduce some type of boundary into a formerly smooth space. By doing so, they enable the demarcation and separation of a *within* and a *beyond*; they reshape the distribution of inter-visibilities, define flows of circulation, set paths and trajectories for people and, consequently, determine the possibilities and impossibilities of encounters.

In hi-tech contemporary Western society, walls appear to be rather low-tech devices when compared with smarter social control devices, such as the "surveillant assemblage" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000), increasingly based on immaterial, digital flow tracking (Lyon, 2001). Yet one should not overlook the fact that walls are still among the most widespread and effective devices for the government of populations around the world, especially in urban environments. Arguably, it is so because walls affect so forcefully the material and sensorial environment. Walls are among the primary boundary-creating objects. The general category "wall" includes, in fact, a wide set of separating artifacts, such as barriers, fences, gates, parapets, wire, and so on, each of which is endowed with its own specific boundary-making features. In parallel to the modern history of governmentality, which has diffused, "capillarized," and infiltrated power devices at each social scale, it is possible to diagnose a concurrent multiplication of walls and wall-like artifacts: It is the passage from the encompassing boundaries of the walled medieval city to the dispersed, articulated, and selective boundaries granted by the complex functioning of walls and zonings within the modern city (Brighenti, 2009).

At the same time that walls set up such perceptual limitations, they also tend to become part of the unquestioned, naturalized background of the here-and-now of a given urban environment. Urban people do not stare at walls, but that does not mean that walls are unimportant: People

look at walls only *a contrario*, so to speak, as dead ends to avoid, literally as *impasses*. Walls are perceived as stable boundaries (Lynch, 1960). Consequently, the feature of in-betweeness that characterizes the wall constantly shifts toward the horizon of the life-world. Alfred Schütz (1970) described the social *Lebenswelt* as something that constitutes an unquestioned, taken for granted horizon of experience. Experiences take place *within* such frame. Visible, actual problems and issues are placed within an unproblematic background. More recently, Vincent Miller (2006) has argued that the phenomenological perspective allows us to make sense of the intrinsic vagueness and "unmappability" of spatial experience. It should be added that, if this is the case, it is at least in part because in the majority of occasions one accepts to confine one's spatial experience within a horizon which is never fully or exhaustively interrogated. In a sense, in many situations, walls belong to such unquestioned, invisible horizon.

Walls are introduced as strategic, but, to borrow the classical distinction from Michel de Certeau (1984), they are always subject to tactical uses, too. Both strategies and tactics can be regarded as territorial endeavors (Kärrholm, 2007). With Lévi-Strauss (1962/1966), walls are played out by *ingénieurs* as well as by *bricoleurs*, by those who plan and project in advance and by those who make do with whatever is at hand. And, as Ingold (2007) has recently suggested developing an insight by Leroi-Gourhan, moving in a given space can be alternatively imagined as preplanned navigation and transport (moving across), or as wayfaring (moving along). Situational interaction, as a form of moving along, constantly modifies and reshapes the significance, impact, and meaning of walls. Graffiti clearly belong to similar tactical interventions on walls. In short, walls are built by day and painted by night. Whereas strategies aim at naturalizing walls, pushing them to the background, tactics somewhat re-thematize them, pulling them toward new fore-grounds. It should be observed that complex practices such as advertisement may play both strategically and tactically. Insofar as one aims to create a foreground one must operate tactically, but one's tactics can be embedded in a long-term planned strategy, such as a corporate strategy.

Tactically speaking, the most remarkable fact is that the wall offers a *visible surface*, which becomes a surface of inscription for stratified, crisscrossing, and overlapping traces. Such traces are highly visible interventions that define a type of social interaction at a distance. Besides immediate direct interaction between people, urban environments are full and sometimes saturated with such types of mediated interaction. Studies of "mediacity" (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Eckardt et al., 2008) offer a clear example. It can be argued that walls create *a public* in Gabriel Tarde's (1901/1969) sense. As visible surfaces, walls define a public focus of attention for a number of viewers and actors who are spatially dispersed. Not simply that: each wall collects a temporally dispersed audience that, at some point, has transited nearby. Hence, the wall becomes part of the struggle for public attention and key element in the configuration of an urban regime visibility (Brighenti, 2007). As observed by Lorenzo Tripodi (2008), the contemporary city is increasingly dominated by "spaces of exposure": attention *qua* visibility is what really makes the commercial worth of certain urban surfaces to the point that surfaces become more valuable than the very architectural support. Outdoor advertisement and graffiti are fully part of such process of attention claiming that repre-sents an essential part of the new type of urban capitalism and entrepreneurialism (Chmielewska, 2005, 2007; Cronin, 2008). In some cases, wrapping becomes so important that it supersedes the wrapped. All these forms of visual communication constitute what Iveson (2007, 2009) calls a "public address," and, as observed by Schacter (2008), if we look at reactions, there is no doubt that graffiti is an address that meets its target. But even factors such as the density of people in a given bounded urban space tactically interacts with the wall itself, as the case of crowds during demon-strations makes sufficiently clear (incidentally, the study of crowds should begin from the environmental spatial affordances those crowds accept or, on the contrary, challenge).

From both strategic and tactical perspectives, the wall is an object that constitutively calls into play the interweaving of space and social relations. Walls, like other territories, are material and

immaterial. They manage space, command attention, and define mobility fluxes that impose conduct, but they are also constantly challenged because of the meaning they assume: They can be reassuring as well as oppressive, they can be irritating as well as inspiring.

Elements of Territorology

Walls are part of the struggle for visibility; walls are territorial devices. These two propositions should be taken together and studied in their mutual codetermination. One of the major stakes for social theory today is precisely to understand the existing link between visibility and territoriality as determinants of the social sphere and the articulation of social fields. Although the present article can hardly be exhaustive, the proposal advanced here is that, to gain a full apprehension of the problem, a general *territorology*, that is, a general science of territories, needs to be revived (Brighenti, 2010). General territorology aims to develop an open dialogue between contributions from a range of disciplines, including biology, zoo ethology, and human ethology; human ecology, social psychology, and social interactionism; human, political, and legal geography; and, finally, social theory. There is no way to deal with such complexity here, but a few crucial points can be underlined.

First, the main challenge of territorology is to take territory as the *explanans* rather than the *explanandum*. In other words, rather than explaining territory in terms of "space imbued with power" or as a "function of behavior," territorology aims to explain *some* types of social spaces and *some* types of social behaviors precisely as *territories*. I stress "some," in the sense that clearly not all spaces and not all behaviors are territorial. In the analysis I seek to develop the territorial *process*, rather than a series of physical spaces or objects, is put at the centre of the inquiry and it is explored in its many-faceted dimensions. Because of its emphasis on process, the point of view of a general territorology should be differentiated from both primordialism and strategism. The primordialist view has been elaborated mainly by ethologists (e.g., Ardrey, 1966; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970), and has been endorsed by some political theorists too, sometimes with a clearly conservative overtone (e.g., Grosby, 1995). On the other hand, the strategist view has been elaborated mainly by geographers and social scientists as a critical response to the primordialist view (e.g., Sack, 1986). Whereas primordialists have insisted that there exists a territorial imperative or territorial instinct, whereby individuals and especially groups are "naturally" attached to some place or region—such as the "Fatherland"—strategists have replied that territory is in fact nothing else than a way of controlling people establishing control over a given space. General territorology seeks to navigate between the Scylla of primordialism and the Charybdis of strategism.

Second, in a general territorology the concept of territory is understood as a deeply *social* phenomenon: social not in the sense of human, but in the sense of something that is coessential to the inner and outer relationships within a multiplicity of *socii*. Thus, it is not the unity of the land that makes territories exist, but the multiplicity of people and the configurations of such multiplicities. Both the primordialist and the strategist view have some merits, insofar as they illuminate, respectively, the emotional and the rational aspects of territories. However, each of these aspects is per se insufficient in capturing the whole import of the territorial phenomenon. What characterizes a territory is the fact that in it emotions and plans, *qua* essentially *imagined* components, come to define a type of social relation. Both ethologists and sociologists, albeit in different ways, have noticed that territoriality entails the "claiming of space" (e.g., Storey, 2001). The essential focus, I would like to suggest, lies precisely in the form of such claiming. A claim entails, and corresponds to, a social relationship. It is something that flows through and binds the claimant and the "claimee." A claim is an act, an encounter that creates and gives shape to a relationship. A territory is such relationship "fixated" and hinged on the *socii* themselves. Hence, a territory can be defined as a "supported" relationship. Space is in many instances the most

visible and logical support, although it should not be concluded that territories are always spatial. Territories exist *at the point of convergence*—which is of course also a point of tension—between relationships and spaces. It is the convergence point of intensions and extensions or, better, the immaterial and the material. So, although we do need a spatialized ontology (Soja, 1989), such ontology should also be attentive to the very different types of materials that can be used to make territories. This refers not simply the fact that territories are marked with various materials, but the fact that such materials become territories in themselves.

Third, seen as a specific type of "prolongation" between the material and the immaterial, territory is to be understood thoroughly as an act, or process. Claims create territorial relationships when they introduce boundaries. Consequently, boundary drawing is the kernel of the territorial claim: territory making *is* in fact boundary making. Territories are the *operation*, or effectuation, of boundaries. That is because boundaries, on their turn, are not objects, but rather forms of negotiations, interactions aimed at managing distances (Canetti, 1960). Distance management entails finding out and defining critical distances, thresholds, points, lines and degrees beneath and beyond which the relationship is substantially modified. To borrow a notion from Luhmann (2004), one might also speak of "stabilization of expectations." But expectations are never stabilized once and for all. Territories must always be produced and stabilized (Kärrholm, 2007) and this involves a series of operations. Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 1991) have advanced a philosophy of territories that is designed as a theory of the sequences of deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and territorialization that occur within and between multiplicities. By building such a powerful process perspective, Deleuze and Guattari have interpreted territories as series of events. A territory, they suggest, consists of a type of linkage (*agencement*) of events in a series.

Finally, the complementary acts of boundary drawing and territory making are acts of *inscription in the visible* (Brighenti, 2007). Here, inscription should be understood in technological terms, even in grammatological and icnological terms (Derrida, 1967; Ferraris, 1997). There exists an intimate relationship between territory and technology, in the sense that the territory belongs in a "middle realm of techno-social mediation," as Vandenberghe (2007, p. 26) has described the key unifying concept of a social–epistemological view that runs from André Leroi-Gourhan, through Michel Serres, to Régis Debray and Bruno Latour. If territory represents a point of convergence and tension between the material and the immaterial, it is a technological act of inscription that determines the *ubi consistam* of territory. Because every technological setup opens up a set of organized opportunities to create some meaning attached to a territory, territorology cannot but engage the study of the drawing technologies of inscription. Meaning is not a mental state but a style of inscription. For inscription to take place, witnesses are needed. It is in this sense that the visible is the element in which every territorial inscription is operated. The visible is the *element* in which boundaries are inscribed, and in which the distinction between the visible and the invisible can be made. Every such distinction is in fact an act of boundary drawing, and boundaries can be drawn only for a public and, in this sense, *in* public. Having unearthed this strict connection between territory and public, let us go back to graffiti territoriality in urban environments.

Graffiti's Territories

Graffiti writing is a practice that is, on the one hand, interstitial—that is, located in between other established social fields—and, on the other, territorial—that is, amounting to an *act of writing* (Fraenkel, 2007). A territory constitutes relationships at the convergence between the material and the immaterial; and it is in relation to these two characteristics that graffiti writing appears on the public stage, in the public space—or, better, in the public domain. For it is not only—although it clearly *is*—a matter of what is legally defined as spatially owned or spatially accessible

Figure 5. Overspin's Hall of Fame in Schio (Vicenza), February 2006
Source: Photo by the author (2006).

(Goodsell, 2003), nor is it only a matter of what is politically defined as the sphere of public communication (Habermas, 1964). It is also, and above all, a matter of what is constructed as the realm of public interaction (Goffman, 1963, 1972; Lofland, 1998), a matter, in other words, of the urban public scene as a *composition* (Joseph, 1998). At the point of convergence and tension, the point of juncture of the material and the immaterial—public *space* and the public *sphere*—a public *domain* appears, which is the territory of shared attention and the field of the distribution of immediate and mediated visibilities.

"The street" is, according to almost all writers I have talked to, the birthplace as well as the target of writing. Here, however, the street should not be understood as a merely physical urban infrastructure. Rather, the street is a territorial construction fundamentally linked to the public destination of graffiti. As such, it is clearly also a discursive and ideological formation that strengthens the consistence of the field of writing. But it can be so only because and insofar as the street and its walls are interpreted in a way that is peculiar to writing itself. Writing is a territorial endeavor and a visibility endeavor that, precisely through its interstitial nature, interrogates the public domain. In short, the two basic questions raised by writing are "What is a writer?," and "What is a public space?"

Graffiti writing is a territorial endeavor in at least two fundamental senses. First, seen from the inside, a tag is essentially a territorial marker (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974). You are not supposed to "cross" someone else's tag. "Crossing" is one of the most serious offences you could do to other writers—so much worse if you cross someone's masterpiece. A crew like Overspin has its own Hall of Fame (Figure 5) where members do their training. The Hall should not be used by other

Figure 6. Nolac drawing at the *Street Fever Convention*, May 2006
Source: Photo by the author (2006).

writers without permission. From this point of view, territoriality is basically linked to respect, and lack of respect or any other defiant acts of disrespect inevitably lead to retaliation (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995; Butler, 2004; Kubrin, 2005). However, framing graffiti as territorial does not mean necessarily interpreting them as a form of "turfing." Graffiti is territorial not only in the sense that is marks a territory as a turf—if it does at all—but primarily in the sense that *it is* a territory in itself. Although usually territories are conceived "horizontally," the prototypical image of horizontal territory being the land, or region; writers practice a type of "vertical" territoriality. Here, I use "vertical" in a quite physical sense, which is different from the distinction introduced by David Delaney (2005, p. 31) between "vertical," hierarchical mapping of territories through different scales and "horizontal," same-scale two-dimensional mapping. In graffiti, what most lay people and city users take as a territorial boundary (wall as dead end in the urban environment, phenomenological horizon of the life-world) becomes a territory in itself, endowed with its own boundaries and its specific social relationships.

The act of drawing is likewise territorial (Figure 6): It is the writer's body that makes a territory with his or her own graffiti, and it is in this sense that many writers say that making graffiti is a research one does in the first place on oneself. A search for identity is a search for a territory, and the body is where it all begins: Graffiti writing is a "technique of the body" (Mauss, 1934). Techniques of the body and technologies of inscription converge in the act of writing: at once using a spray can, developing a skill, developing a series (the tag being the serial entity *par excellence*), and developing a style (although not the topic of the present article, style matters a great deal—see Figure 7).

Second, seen from the outside, the writer in fact "touches" something that belongs to all, something that is public, like a wall in a street or a train's façade, and, by doing so, he or she renders visible a number of questions about the norms and the rights, about the *law*—pluralistically conceived (Macdonald, 2006)—that defines the nature and the register of social interaction in

Figure 7. A piece by Sparki made at the *Cities at the Wall Festival*, Trento, July 2008
Source: Photo by the author (2008).

public spaces. The writer is a psychosocial character that belongs constitutively to the public space. Following Isaac Joseph and his reflection on Gabriel Tarde (Joseph, 1984), the writer is a *traître*, a "betrayal." Creating a peculiar territory that escapes captures (established social fields), the writers betrays first-order territorial memberships in order to constitute second-order relational territories. The separation between territorial membership and relational territory is crucial for the creation of public space, because, as Joseph (1984) explains echoing Deleuze, "a public space is not a plane of organisation [*plan d'organisation*] of identities in an environment, but a plane of consistence [*plan de consistance*] where identities are problematised and situations become constantly redefinable" (p. 40). Because of this, the two conventional, opposing views that interpret writing alternatively as art or as deviance fail to identify the real stake in the practice of writing. Such stake is not "art or crime." The stake is, on the contrary, the definition of the nature and the limits of public space *qua* public. Res puts it shortly but effectively,

Common spaces—everyone understands them as they wish.

Writers look at walls in a way that significantly differs both from the average street user, as well as from the perspective of actors located within specific social fields. For writers, as noticed by Halsey and Young (2006, p. 286) too, the wall is "always already" marked. One can grant that this type of account is part of what criminologists would call the "neutralization of inhibition," whereby one frames one's actions so that they appear minimized vis-à-vis the context in which they are located, and thus justified or at least potentially more justifiable. Generally speaking, it is always better to frame one's action as a reaction—so, for instance, in international politics you do not "attack a country," you "react to a threat," and so on.

However, what is peculiar of the writer's gaze is that it operates a relative deterritorialization of conventional territorial boundaries, thus shifting the thresholds of visibility of the public domain. Most everyday uses of urban space regard walls as separators between a "within" and a "beyond." The wall is commonly perceived from an essentially "orthogonal" perspective. As recalled above, walls have always been used this way: Walls are governmental tools that set limits and impasses, and complementarily allowed paths and trajectories. Writers invent a way of using walls that is no longer orthogonal. Their approach to the wall is "longitudinal" rather than orthogonal. The wall not so much separates a "within" from a "beyond," as it joins a "here" to a "there." It is a syntagmatic, rather than paradigmatic, view. For a writer, the present, actual wall is an affordance and an invitation, but in itself remains only a part of a larger, virtual wall—it is just a sentence in a continuing conversation. And it is the act of joining your sentences into an ongoing conversation, which implies the presence of several voices, that leads you to question the qualities and the properties of this shared, common domain, the public. Materially, this aim leads you into a reconnaissance of urban public territories: that is why writers—and especially "bombers" or taggers—are, in the first place, *walkers*. A particular tag may not mean much, as its critics contend, and in fact it does not, at least until it is seen as a sample of a larger dream. Immaterially, it leads to raise the most fundamental question about the public domain: What is, politically, legally, economically, and jurisdictionally speaking, *public*?

Conclusions

Like other practices, interstitial practices use artifacts too, but in a way that is contestedly located across various established social fields. During my ethnographic observation of a crew of graffiti writers in Italy, a number of questions came to my mind on the relationships between established social fields, interstitial practices, and the use of public space. Only later did I realize that these questions were not my private curiosities, but rather questions of public concern raised by all interstitial practices such as graffiti writing. A sociological attempt to understand the connection between urban environments, walls, and social relationships, it has been suggested in this article, could take advantage from concepts such as territory, visibility, and public domain.

Walls are subject to both strategic and tactical uses. Strategy and tactics are in fact *territorial formations* that shape different uses of walls in the urban environment. The general layout of a science of territorial formations, which can be called territorology, has been presented in order to focus on the series of acts that draw at one and the same time boundaries and territories. What a territorological analysis seeks to grasp is, in other terms, how zones of convergence of the material and the immaterial are formed that define social relations and how these relations are materially enacted as territories. What is most interesting for a reflection on public space is the fact that boundaries are thresholds inscribed in the field of visibility. The different positions in the field of visibility can also be defined in terms of an economy of public attention.

The public is therefore the arena where territories are created: the public *domain*, that is, public space and public sphere at the same time, a zone of convergence and tension between the material and the immaterial. And, as Iveson (2009, p. 242) suggests, "to address a public is to address a horizon of strangers." From this perspective, graffiti writing and its longitudinal approach to walls assumes its full significance: not as a subcultural practice among others, or as a personal search for the thrill (although these perspectives are certainly legitimate and important aspects to develop a good description of the practice at stake), but as a radical interrogation of public territories, a questioning of the social relationships that define the public domain. Thus graffiti can be called a form of resistance only if by resistance we mean an actually creative, productive force rather than simply a reactive one. It is not skeptical doubt, but the fundamental act that severs relational

territories from predetermined memberships and opens up the public domain as a fluctuating, processual and affective territory.

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Bio

Andrea Mubi Brighenti is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Trento, Italy. He holds a PhD in sociology of law (University of Milano, Italy), an MA in law and society (Oñati International Institute, Spain), and a BA in communication studies (University of Bologna, Italy). His research topics include social interaction, law, urban studies, and social theory, with particular attention to the categories of visibility, territory, respect, resistance, and diavolution.