Suggesting that the form of signature graffiti presents a number of vital insights into the complex relationship between place and practices of writing, this paper centers on the visual space of two cities, Montréal and Warsaw. By recovering some neglected and pointing to little-known theoretical references, the essay proposes a framework for studying graffiti, a method of examining urban surface manifestations that supports a close reading of inscriptions in situ. This close reading engages with the iconographic, spatio-temporal and linguistic dimensions of wall writing in its specific locale—within the urban context as well as the discursive and graphic space of writing on graffiti. By foregrounding the place of graffiti in these varied contexts, the essay also aims to reconcile the often separate treatments afforded to images and text, representational and discursive forms.

**Keywords:** writing and place; signature graffiti; Warsaw; Montréal

It is the wall that gives
to all these graffiti
their stylistic unity
their family resemblance
as if they had been done by the same hand.

—Brassaï, 2002, p. 151
To evoke the special local character of Los Angeles for the 1994 traveling exhibition *Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public Realm*, the walls of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) featured bold hip-hop pieces. Although visible in the photographs documenting the display, graffiti did not form the content of the show, neither was it mentioned in the exhibition catalog (Ferguson, 1994; MOCA, n.d.; Muschamp, 1994). It functioned as wallpaper, a stylistic gesture providing a backdrop for urban planning projects on display. The same exhibit, when shown at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montréal as *Stratégies urbaines* was given a different local ambiance—graffiti scrawls intended to be read as place specific [1] [1a]. Written mostly in French, a stylized palimpsest of words, phrases, and slogans referenced the political climate of the time and pointed to the key role of language in representations of local identity. This backdrop differed substantially from the Los Angeles mise-en-scène. Whereas at MOCA separate pieces were set against white gallery walls, at the CCA the representation included references to the urban canvas as well. The brick wall pattern was rendered as a background of the scrawls, suggesting that Montréal writing was inseparable from its surface, from its materiality, and from its local discourse. Still, the graffiti acted as a mere decoration, a uniform design gesture that framed the exhibit. Akin to street decoration setting off a staged political event and indexing what is actually placed on display (ideology, national allegiances, political programs), in this show, simulated graffiti functioned as carefully constructed set design, a rhetorical backdrop whose stylistic choice suggested radical display aesthetics and provided a forceful (gallery) context for the exhibition proper. [2] The catalog of the exhibit made no references to place specificity of urban interventions, graffiti, or different local writing styles and traditions (Ferguson, 1994). And although Montréal graffiti is indeed (as the walls of the CCA suggested) strongly rooted in the Quebec sovereignty debate [2], a brief survey of the streets of the city in the mid-’90s would have demonstrated that it was not wordy bilingual contestations over the separatist issues but, rather, hip-hop graffiti that dominated the actual urban surface [3].

At the same time, in Warsaw, one of the few remaining wartime graffiti was placed behind a glass panel as part of the architectural heritage display [4] [4a]. It was the authenticity of the sign, its role as a remaining witness to history, that formed the core of that exhibition. The graffito itself, a singular, crudely rendered drawing, was framed, captioned, and set out for viewing as an exhibit, as residual material evidence, and as an indexing element of a system of informational and historical display.
Monumentalized in granite or bronze, sculpted or carved on commemorative plaques, and referenced in any graphic material related to the wartime resistance [5], Warsaw’s political and patriotic graffiti form the common visual vocabulary often drawn from in times of political crisis or shifts in political power (Kopcińska & Żuk Piwkowski, 2006). Here as well, the image of the brick wall significantly contributes to the local image of graffiti: The urban surface seems inseparable from the graphic and linguistic form of the sign. In Warsaw, however, the brick wall is not representative of the local building character, but rather, it functions as a highly charged symbolic surface. It references the raw texture of urban wounds, exposed substrate of war-damaged buildings, walls denuded of their plaster skin—here, the brick wall designates the ruins, not traditional material for building exteriors. In Warsaw, the political roots of graffiti are set in the wartime trauma of the city and the history of occupation and resistance (predating the caesura of 1968 Paris or the 1970s in New York typically set for the history of graffiti). Contemporary political graffiti indexing historical symbols or slogans from World War II frequently appears on the walls of Warsaw; one of the most enduring signs of resistance is a wartime “tag” of the underground army. Since the mid-’90s, however, and despite the manifestly renewed interest in national iconography and local historical symbols, the visual sphere of the city has been saturated with graffiti whose tradition and preoccupations with the letterform were drawn from elsewhere. It has been hip-hop graffiti that dramatically reinscribed the graphic space of wall writing [6].

Looking at one specific piece of signature graffiti, can we tell its place of origin [7]? Is it Warsaw or Montréal? Which local history or current condition does it reference? And does it matter for the meaning of graffiti if the canvas of the wall has a different history? If it comes out of different urban or historical processes shaping the public spaces (whether as a corollary of real estate developments, political unrest, or war destruction)? Does it matter if the graphic practice of public contestation is driven by dissimilar forces or carries a dramatically different penalty, a disparate history of consequences? Can we even talk of graffiti as a singular phenomenon, or could we say that different forms of graphic marking interact with their urban contexts in ways that are shaped by their linguistic, iconic, and territorial significations and, in turn, inflect their specific context with different meanings?

Aiming to highlight the meaning of the graffiti idiom in its specific locale, I look at these two dissimilar places, Montréal and Warsaw, each strongly, though differently, shaped by
language and national identity as well as a conflicted relationship to contemporary American culture (and an attachment to the ideological symbolism of 1968 Paris). Both cities have a significant tradition of political wall writing, and both are now grappling with asserting their identities under the tremendous pressure and ubiquitous presence of the global visual language and sameness of urban imagery [8]. Graffiti is an important cultural site for negotiating local identity. And hip-hop graffiti is a particularly potent scene for exploration, if only because of the omnipresence of its idiom in the contemporary sensory field. We encounter graffiti not only in physical urban spaces, but in the images (and sounds) that saturate everyday culture: in fashion, music, advertising, newspapers and magazines, visual arts, and even in and around scholarship if we consider the number of book covers, for example, that (sometimes entirely gratuitously) use graffiti images to indicate the hip-ness of their subject. Signature graffiti has become a powerful figure of mainstream visual language, and as such it foregrounds the problematical relationship of language and graphic mark.

In this discussion of the relationship between place and graffiti, I propose to examine the complexities of urban visual landscape through three frames: language, context, and the theory that could link the two. My aim is to set out a number of points for further elaboration; to frame the conceptual, theoretical and methodological context for more comprehensive research of the ways graffiti inflects places. The examination of graffiti in situ is brief; it is meant to exemplify a method rather than provide a comprehensive discussion. However, the mode of visual presentation needs to be considered here as forming a critical part of the argument. The presentation of this essay and the position of images within the text are meant to foreground the tensions between the spatial, textual, and pictorial elements of graffiti. However, the focus on a close reading of writing in situ conflicts within the visual field with the rules on the presentation of images in the traditional formats of academic publications. Here, the reader is therefore invited to contemplate as well the limitations of the forms of arguments, presentation, and indexing of the visual material and the difficulties with moving beyond the merely illustrative treatment of images and the accepted scopic regimes of academic discourse(s). Through stressing the relationship between image and text, the essay suggests the need for exploring new modi of discourse that could attend more effectively to material and graphic spheres of the visual phenomena under scrutiny.

Framing [Con]text

Because the focus here is on signature graffiti, a type of graffiti that is preoccupied with names and letters, I begin with a spotlight on language. [9] Following James Elkins’s (1997) claim that “[no] reading can be immune to the problems of terminology” (p. 93), I wish to first bring under scrutiny the lexis of this discussion. By framing I mean fashioning a set of circumstances that serves as the background of a particular phenomenon. I do not mean to falsify any evidence, although admittedly, I intend the subversive tone of the word, particularly in its proximity to the word con with its sense of glib persuasion. Emphasizing the deliberately limited, literal meaning of text—its connotation of an
entity composed of written characters—allows for questioning
the commonly set up disparity between the verbal and pictorial,
linguistic and iconic forms necessarily coincidental in wall writ-
ing and in signature writing.

Framing graffiti as **inscription** implicates both the material writ-
ing surface and the language. Here, I do not agree with Sassoon and
Gaur (2000), who consider graffiti not an inscription but an icon
for, as they claim, “it appeals directly” (p. 72). I do not see such a
categorical separation as productive. The very presence of a name
contained in graffiti renders a signature (a piece, “throw-up,” or a
tag) simultaneously a visual sign and a textual mark. [10] The
material trace of a gesture implicates both the writing process and the expressive graphic
field. A signature is a (visible) language sign—a textual presence. It is also, I propose, a
**con-text**, radically questioning the verbal in text yet creatively colonizing critical elements
of writing—alphabetic **13** signs and sounds of the written marks. The coincidence of
words and images in graffiti demands an analysis that concerns both linguistic and
graphic expression: A graffiti signature not only resists the purely iconic definitions, it is
also “writing” of a nonlinguistic sign in the Derridian sense of being “indicative of
the particular” and “designating the exterior surface” (1979, pp. 7, 10). Considering the
material surface of graffiti marks ensures that the specificity of the urban context and
the local nuance of the practice are brought under scrutiny. Paying attention to language
(and its various articulations and manifestations) also underscores the significance of the
term **writing** and the plural form **graffiti** (used as a collective noun). Already in the 1950s,
Brassaï pointed out this paradox of the term **graffiti**: Although the mark (a graffito)
denotes a personal and singular gesture, the term **graffiti** homogenizes the expression
into a generic plural (Brassaï, 2002, p. 112). **14** And the global reach of the term forces the
immensely varied phenomenon of wall writing into a field of equivalence circumscribed
by hip-hop aesthetics.

Although signature graffitists insist on calling themselves **writers**,**15** their practice is not commonly explored as writing. Even the
term **writers**, when encountered in literature on graffiti, is often
set in quotation marks (Stewart, 1991). Yet the practice of graff-
iti is certainly that of writing. It involves language forms as
much as it implicates graphic marks; ways of phrasing and those
of forming letters; composing words and skillful use of tools to
inscribe surfaces with markings; engagement with sound; and
committed training of hand in penmanship, calligraphy, and
typography **[11]**. Following the established terminology of ling-
guistics, we could consider graffiti as visual **parole**, and its forceful
references to gesture and rhythm, the sound and performance, as
encompassed by the **langue** of a broader cultural practice. But graffiti is not usually seen
within the framework of linguistics, as it is typically the transgressive nature of this
practice that grips scholars drawn to the subject (Cresswell, 1998; Stewart, 1991). The
widespread attraction to the subversive aura of graffiti and its radical aesthetics may be
an impediment to critical examination of the phenomenon by privileging a celebration
of the visual rebellion rather than engaging in a substantive analysis of the visual prac-
tice. Also, it seems that writing itself, despite the theoretical attention bestowed on it by
Jacques Derrida, has not yet become an important object of sustained cultural analy-
sis. The original (classical) division set between “good” writing on the soul and “bad”

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**Graffiti and Place**

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writing contaminated with embodiment and techne may still persist (Stewart, 1991) if the critique and analysis of graphic expression has remained largely separated from linguistic inquiry. Visible forms of language—in their often simultaneously iconic, symbolic, and indexical dimensions—continue to elude scholarly attention, as much of the contemporary theory presupposes the Saussurian arbitrariness of linguistic sign and persists in considering writing a mere record of language expression (Harris, 1995, 2001).

The second framing device I employ is graffiti’s locality. My close reading of graffiti in situ involves double takes: a close-up on the particular and a consideration of the broader context; probing into specific surface manifestations positioned within the entirety of the urban visual sphere as well as inquiring into their immediate linguistic and symbolic fields set within the locally bounded system of references and the surrounding discourse. Such multifocal reading is attempted here by way of positioning the image of writing (the visual evidence) within the same platform as the analysis of the marking and its context. In contradiction of James Elkins’s (2000) assertion on the close reading of images, I am proposing that a close reading of the visual sphere is possible (and urgent), if tedious and often difficult as George Perec had concluded (Emerson, 2003).16 Indeed, following Elkins’s claim, there is an inherent contradiction in our dealing with the visual. Although a close reading of images has to be impossible in order to let us get on with the vaguer meanings we all prefer...stiflingly close reading is an imperative of humanist scholarship and of literacy more generally; it has to be possible in order for there to be such a thing as a text or an image. (Elkins, 2000, p. 102, italics added)

However, there is another contradiction here as well: an unproductive conceptual separation of the objects of inquiry into the disciplinarily and methodologically bound territories dealing with the verbal or the visual. Although we have “ready to hand” sophisticated theories of textual analysis, established methods of examining verbal utterances we have not yet allowed for equally rigorous modes of analysis of the visual sphere and the commonplace (material) utterances that it contains. The text, even in the analysis of the visual object, is typically assigned a higher epistemological status than an image; it could be both an object and a tool of examination. The image, on the other hand, if it is not an object of analysis, functions mainly as a buttress, routinely relegated to the role of an illustration: a supportive element, an example, at best a rhetorical prop that emphasises the argument, an ornament that makes a point of a textual argument more vivid.

Some of the difficulties with finding the adequate platform for visual analysis may be evident in the presentation of this discussion. Pointing at the discursive role of images, limited as it can be within the accepted formats of delivery, problematizes the status of images in the academic texts. Consequently, it brings attention to the context in which the particular (visual) manifestations appear. What could potentially contribute to a more complex investigation (of the image as well as graffiti) is drawing from Elkins’s (2000) argument the specific attention to the necessarily shifting focus of the analysis and the basic notion that both “the artefact and the reading are always tied to some context” (p. 93). Reading in context entails paying attention to the individual marks as well as the entire environ in which they are immersed: surrounding spatial and temporal patterns, groupings, types, and their temporal organization evident in simultaneities and sequences of visual events. The close reading of context of the graphic sign, then, demands setting within the same platform the visual and the textual argument. Accordingly, text and image need to be considered together, and they must be allowed analogous epistemological status.17 This discussion, then, tries to
attend to the problem of context at multiple levels: that of the locale of a graffito mark as well as that of the contexts of its presentation. And the close reading of context proposed here may be subverting Jonathan Culler’s (1988) notion of framing as it attempts to frame the context rather than framing the signs (p. 9).

For the theoretical framing of this discussion, I take the work that specifically attends to the material context of language signs, namely Karl Bühler’s theory of language and particularly his notion of the deictic field. Bühler’s theory, expounded in his 1934 treatise, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, offers a sustained analysis of the semantic fields of communication and an important critique of the arbitrariness of signs (Bühler, 1934/1990). The work has been largely overlooked by English-language cultural theory and scholarship. Elkins (2003) points to this briefly in his examination of usefulness of Pierce’s theory for the analysis of the visual, mentioning as well other consequential oversights. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) note the unquestioned reign of a singular (Saussurian) semiotic model despite its inadequacy for the visual realm, and they propose to expand the “semiotic landscape” of the field (p. 5). The 1990 English-language translation of Bühler’s text has not made a significant mark on the scholarship concerned with the analysis of the visual. It is to this somewhat obscure theoretical reference that I look for resourceful tools for the analysis of the urban signature. It is Bühler’s concentration on the deictic field of the sign that provides a conceptual frame for dealing with the core characteristics of hip-hop graffiti: the name and its fame dependent on being noticed and indexed to a specific location valued for its danger, reputation, and visibility.

Bühler considers language signs to be highly context dependent or, to use Umberto Eco’s later term, inherently topo-sensitive (1973, p. 3). Drawing the deictic field into the sphere of meaning of a sign (as well as elaborating the relationship between the sign’s pointing and naming functions) is crucial for graffiti, whose self-pointing gesture is its most significant attribute. Graffiti is an act of pointing to itself, an act of calling attention to self while designating specific place as well as indexing its environ and authority of the writer. “Self-pointing” goes further in its vectorial attributes and its specificity than referencing or indexing [12]. There is also something vaguely iconoclastic in using a marginalized theoretical approach to interrogate a phenomenon that has become rather conventional in its aesthetics and ubiquitous in its reach as well as somewhat predictable in the types of theoretical approaches it attracts (Cresswell, 1998; Stewart, 1991). But more important, Bühler’s (1934/1990) theory affords a consideration of graffiti in its dual linguistic and graphic form while accounting for the individual mark’s place and the related field of meaning.

Within the Anglo-American scholarship, few theories of language and semiotics consider the writing surface, and few probe the complexity of the simultaneous presence of text and image, both the discursive and representational dimensions that are fused in the context of inscription. Only recently, some theorists—most notably, Roy Harris in linguistics—have begun to seek integrated theories of communication that would account for writing’s material context and thus attend to the semiological function of the surface and the complex properties of the graphic space that writing occupies (Harris 1995, 2000). Art historians, for example, Elkins in *The Domain of Images*, have begun to discuss the need for close readings and theoretical treatment of non–art historical images, including different types of inscriptions (Elkins, 1997). Scholars preoccupied with the letterform and systems of writing, such as Johanna Drucker, sustain close attention to the
broader, historically grounded, spatio-temporal environment within which forms of language expression perform (1998). Important theoretical and methodological considerations—and a hopeful attention to the inscription—are contributed by scholarship in social semiotic and particularly the work on the grammar of visual design by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). And although sociological awareness of the nuance of context and specificity of place has been noteworthy—with reading of the urban details lucidly revealing of the complex discourse(s) of difference and spatial power (Keith, 2005)—the material manifestations of graffiti writing in its urban context have not been afforded sufficient scrutiny. One of the key limitations of the scholarship on graffiti that needs to be considered is an inadequacy of the theoretical apparatus for dealing with manifestations that defy easy classification, a simplifying separation into the categories of text or image.

Deictic Field

In Bühler’s (1934/1990) formulation, the deictic field that pertains to the object of semiosis overlaps and interacts in the process of communication with the expressive field related to the sign maker or sender and the triggering or “appeal” field pertaining to the sign reader or the receiver (pp. iv, 2). Thus in the process of communication, the sign-object—and not only the process of semiosis or a sign that stands in for the object—is given a role in making meaning. And if we consider the sign as a palpably articulated object with material presence (as is the case for any signpost), then the problem of surface, materials, substances, and tools would need to be drawn into the analysis. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) begin to point toward the importance of materiality of graphic signs (pp. 230-241), although the rigorous analysis of surface and material presence of inscription (and of graffiti) is yet to be undertaken. Harris (1995) sets out parameters of such analysis by pointing to the importance of surface. When we substantially engage with the materiality of graffiti—its graphic surface and specificity of its articulation—concepts of indexing and indicating reveal their nuanced difference in directionality, scope, and the mode of gestural specificity: Whereas pointing (designating the here) implicates specifying location with its particularity of material context as well as modes of the sign-object’s attachment (bonding or affixing) to the particular site, the procedure of indexing relates the sign-object to its surroundings in ways that specify categories and points of references (with the focus of pointing elsewhere). Deictic field circumscribes the sign’s spatio-temporal orientation, the “here-now-I” system of subjective bearing (Bühler, 1934/1990, p. 17); it is based on deictic cues that form a particular ordering pattern of the site of the sign’s attachment that the meaning becomes manifest.

For topo-sensitive signs (signposts of various kinds), it is the nature of the material relationship to physical context, the condition of attachment, that in an important way demarcates their semantic functions. The deictic field of a sign is formed as much by the particular bond between the locale and the sign as by the indexical relations within the surrounding semantic field. Not a mere location but a type of material articulation, fixity, portability, degrees of freedom. Bühler (1934/1990) draws into his concept of deictic field material aspects of those elements that form the semiotic collective, as for him each language sign designates “a well-defined place in physical space and thus an environment consisting of things” (p. 182). Deixis of each sign, then, implicates visibility, placement, and specificity of articulation in the material world. In this field, “linguistic representation” cannot be neatly separated from “pictorial representation,”
neither one nor the other borderline condition is realizable or usable within the semant-
ic field, all known means of representation use images (and likeness) and convention (and symbol) combination (Bühler, 1934/1990, pp. 212-215). Bühler (1934/1990) points to this difficulty by invoking an ancient dilemma: “Prophet to the left, prophet to the right, and the child of the world in the middle” (p. 214). He argues that it is neces-
sary to consider a mediated coordination between a linguistic formulation of palpable
states of affairs outside of language and a visual formulation of linguistic events that are
not pictorial representations (p. 215).

As a deictic sign, graffiti’s aim is reception (self-pointing through visibility, place-
ment, articulation); as a naming sign, its goal is recognition (indexing within the
locally bound hierarchies). We may also note a distinction between a specific position
of the “I” of the mark in relation to an inclusive and an exclusive “we” articulated for
the “I” of a sign. This point, explored in much depth by Bühler (1934/1990, pp. 121,
159), is an important addendum to more contemporary discussions of the declarative
“I” of graffiti, such as that suggested by Richard Sennett (1990, pp. 208-209). But
bringing the notion of the “I” into the elaboration of the deictic field does not indicate
an intention of taking up the question of authorship, and that is precisely why Bühler’s
formulation is so useful for this analysis. The “I,” then, is understood in this discussion
primarily as “I here”; it is not setting up the writer as an underwriter of “place in con-
text” that is the focus here; rather, it is the material and graphic qualities of the mark
that remain in place. The discussion below is centered on the (particular) here of the
graffiti mark. The “here” of the mark provides the mediated coordination between
the linguistic formulation and “those palpable states of affairs outside of language”
(Bühler, p. 216).

Text in Situ

[12] Manifestly present in its context and strongly defined by
its accrued layers of meaning, graffiti is rarely examined in situ. Most typically, a graffito is considered as an iconic presence dis-
articulated from its material context and assigned a role of rhetor-
cally useful illustrative material. Even in those highly attentive
studies of context, such as Keith’s (2005) After the Cosmopolitan?
for example, graffiti’s graphic space is given a decorative role; it is
a base for the cover design (the singular image in the book),
annotated with a photographic credit, not indexed to a specific
place or dwelled upon. Contemporary scholarship eagerly set-
ing itself against a backdrop of the city, against urban surfaces
saturated with images, continues to assign an inferior role to visual analysis of visual
phenomena. The rapid and significant developments in the emerging discipline of
visual culture (or visual studies, depending on the territorial demarcation) have not yet
resulted in the substantial rethinking of the modes of presentation and articulation
of visual argument(s). Although there is emerging evidence that visual essay may be con-
sidered an innovative and legitimate genre of reflection, modes of visual presentation
of knowledge remain in their traditional role of illustrative, decorative gestures, justified
by necessity of visual explication, essential only as illustration of a verbal argument. As
we continue to frame and explain the visual world through textual arguments, we forgo
a possibility of a different direction of insight potentially leading from the visual to the
text. To seriously consider text *in situ*, we need to account for its epistemological position in scholarship—not merely its position on the walls of cities but in the pages of academic texts. And here, we have not substantively considered the roles played by text and image in demonstration of an argument.

Also, the epistemological implications of the differences in copyright treatment of word and image need to enter the discussion here. Whilst knowledge contained in, or articulated through, printed texts is in the public domain and anyone can perform a close analysis of a text as long as the established bibliographic conventions are adhered to, the rules governing the use of images in published research impose considerable limitations on the kind of visual analysis one may be able to employ. Within the domain of images, we are governed by art historical notions of authorship and related restrictions on reproduction. Whereas a researcher can comment on the visual field observed in an exhibition, or a photograph from an exhibit, presenting a detailed visual analysis of that (visual) event demands securing the permission to display the image in a printed form. Although we may discuss the content of a book and quote its text at length (within the parameters of established bibliographic modes), we cannot visually “cite” the book’s cover image without a complicated and often costly process of procuring the necessary agreements. This regulatory asymmetry is particularly vivid with images of graffiti: Whereas the art and academic world simply lift images from their urban context and use them freely (and often without credit), any researcher requiring to present the visual analysis of that treatment of graffiti needs to secure permission. This is not a place for a discussion of the complexities of copyright laws, but it is necessary to point out how this serious lopsidedness in our approach to the visual and linguistic material imposes significant limitations on related scholarship. For the purpose of this article, this meant forgoing the use of images that, although crucial for the visual analysis, proved too difficult to obtain for publication. This has of course constrained the intended argument as the analysis *in situ* demands the focus on the specific context. And one of those (visual) contexts considered important for this discussion would be the visual representation of graffiti in the discourse on the phenomenon. The graphic space of a visual event can of course be described or interpreted in words, but it cannot be effectively analyzed without a close visual examination. The notion of text *in situ* implies the particular condition of articulation: the position of the image and text in the city as well as on the page presenting the argument.

**Locality of Writing**

With its strong formal characteristics, when examined as a collection of dislocated images, signature graffiti in quite dissimilar places may appear to be alike. The same tools and available “pattern books” of graffiti Web sites, black books, magazines, and advertisements effectively promote similar styles for quite different places. The commercialization of graffiti images adds to the spread of generic “globalized” graffiti idiom [7]. A cursory glance at the visual space of Warsaw and Montréal allows one to draw easy comparisons. A close reading of the local context, however, reveals layers of nuance that are place specific and, like signatures themselves, are unique and unrepeatable, “simultaneously familiar...
and exceptional” (Fraenkel, 2002, p. 315). Such a reading of inscriptions accounts for their specific locale, their place of attachment—the urban surface, with articulations of the built form, urban scale, building morphology, and the textures of exterior walls—all forming the graphic space of graffiti writing.

A comparative analysis of graffiti, besides its potential for highlighting the particularities of the examination in situ, brings into focus different urban dynamics shaping the practices of inscription and the historical and geographic specificities that modulate the singular articulation of individual mark. In undertaking a comparative study, we can also potentially open up the analysis to theoretical insight drawn from differing sources and cultural traditions, allowing our examination to negotiate or question accepted scopic regimes and intellectual attitudes. This should be of particular importance at a time when globalization of the image world is accompanied by the globalizing processes within the academic world and the (predominantly Anglo-American) language of discourse on visual culture. Reaching for a specific language-based approach relevant to the site of exploration may enrich the analysis. In the French-language scholarship, for example, numerous works focus on materiality of writing and the phenomenon of signature, such as the works of Frankel or Roy Harris, whose theoretical treatment of the “signs of writing” (semiologie d’escriture) was published in French about a decade before the English version was written. Even if this intellectual tradition does not register in the scholarship on contemporary graffiti in Montréal, it may be important to note its lack of local presence. Similarly, it should be significant to point to the presence of a different (local) tradition of articulating the problematic of the visual in the Polish-language scholarship. Informed by the work of Roman Ingarten, Karl Bühler, and Roman Jakobson, the work of a Polish art historian Mieczysław Porębski is suggested here as particularly pertinent to the subject of urban writing (Chmielewska, 2005a, 2005b).

[13] A component of the visual landscape, graffiti form an important part of the ikonosfera (“iconosphere”) of a given place (Chmielewska, 2005a, 2005b). Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon (2003) refer to the totality of semiotic elements in the visual field as a semiotic aggregate (p. 175). They aim at framing a new brand of semiotics focused on “discourses in place.” Here, I am interested in interrogating the visible semiotic landscape (Kress & de Leeuven), or rather a semiotic surround that holds together texts and images, discourses and representations (p. 15). I am interested in finding ways to elucidate the object of investigation. As such, I find the term iconosphere conceptually richer and better fitting for the analysis of the visual (Chmielewska, 2005a, 2005b). The fact that the concept is also strongly rooted in the intellectual and cultural tradition of one of the places included in this comparative argument is not insignificant. The concept, introduced and theorized in the 1970s by Porębski, encompasses the complexity and immersive nature of the visual environment, pointing to the importance of attending to the entire context in the analysis of the visual (Chmielewska 2005a, 2005b; Porębski, 1972). Iconosphere is the palpable environment of information that encompasses all elements of the visual landscape. Within that term, the notion of an icon must be understood as not merely referring to those signs that are mimetic but, rather, as closer to the character of ikona (a religious painting of Eastern Orthodox Church) that includes language (writing) and visual representation (image) within the same plane of the painting, both instrumental to complete visual
and narrative space and thus the significance of *ikona* (Elwich, 2006). The arresting gaze of the figure in *ikona* structures the deictic field with its powerful vector of engagement, anchoring the direction of viewing and of spiritual force and indexing the meaning of the particular piece. The concept of the iconosphere also suggests the immersive quality formed by the visible and the envisioned, potentially made visible (imaged and imagined), and of simultaneously present elements, their spatio-temporal alignments, categories, hierarchies, patterns, and sequences (Porębski, 1972, p. 18).

An additional useful conceptual frame that also necessitates considering the notions of entirety and simultaneity comes from another theorist working within the same intellectual tradition who elaborated the concept of *ikonosfera*, a contemporary Polish philologist and an “anthropologist of the word” and of the everyday, Roch Sulima (Godlewski et al., 2003). Sulima (2002) suggests situating individual (visual) utterances within the *corpus inscriptionum* of the particular place: the presence of other writings, their form and language, their hierarchies and semiotic functions informing the writing surface, and the entirety of texts making up the manifest urban totality as well as its theoretical and literary context (p. 132). Graffiti, then, I suggest, must be positioned as well within the language of discourse that circumscribes it, that considers the visible expression on the streets within the particular canon of inquiry. Here, I deliberately limit the notion of discourse to discourse on graffiti. Other discourses within which the practice and its manifestations are immersed, are set aside for the purpose of this discussion: They are positioned within the peripheral view—necessarily present within the frame but not in focus.

Surface

[14] Each city canvas invites a different treatment, form, placement, extent, and magnitude for wall writing. Mixed types and the scale of buildings within the centre of Montréal provide a heavily textured, brick canvas, with plentiful and varied angled surfaces. Graffiti here needs to be bold, large, and persistent to compete with its surroundings, to write over building details and make itself visibly present [15]. Display surfaces are in abundance at the street level, on walls flanking the gaps in the street contiguity, and places of highest visibility near rooftops, on blind walls, and façades accessible from shorter adjacent buildings [16]. The maze of underground streets and metro stations in Montréal provides additional display surfaces for quick missives. Residential areas, with their entanglement of metal stairs, porches, and front gardens, form a more challenging substrate, so graffiti there tend to congregate around corner stores and laneway entrances. Places of graffiti conventions traditionally located downtown showcase graffiti art, but one can also encounter complex graffiti pieces unexpectedly, by looking up.
or turning a corner. New forms of street expression compete within the central spaces of the city with what could be considered by now “traditional” hip-hop writing; some, such as the works of Roadsworthy for example, step down from the wall and appropriate the urban floor instead (C100, 2006, p. 72). Competition for wall surface comes from commercial images: outdoor advertising, commissioned public art, or antigraffiti strategies [17]. Within the city center, the idiom of hip-hop graffiti is strongly present in colorful compositions and recognizable signatures, in “brand names” of specific writers, interspersed with commercial “signature” pieces that employ or appropriate graffiti idiom (whether aerosol-painted commercial murals or commissioned graffiti rendered by various crews or writers who use their skills for commercial aims) [18]. One could argue that image and style predominate on the visual landscape [19]. In the city defined so strongly by language debate, the urban surface is saturated by the hip-hop graffiti strongly centered on the image and style, with language-based expressions (and the local linguistic debate) rarely entering the graphic space of (signature) wall writing.

[20] In Warsaw, the city core offers long stretches of smooth plaster, whether on facades, in passageways, or on walls surrounding churches or building complexes. There are fewer spaces accessible from rooftops and no back lanes. The traditional system of courtyards had been destroyed in the rebuilding of the socialist capital in the 1950s and 1960s (Chmielewska, 2005a). Those few still extant remains—left neglected and thus not enclosed into security-controlled compounds—seem to invite chance graffiti artists, amateurish and not highly sophisticated “pieces” attesting to the hierarchy of the spaces of display [6]. Surfaces at street level along the main roads are densely covered by markings that were rendered quickly: mainly small stencils, tags, throw-ups, quick silvers, and various hurried proclamations [21]. Only occasionally a more elaborate signature can be found downtown. For the most part, graffiti art is displayed on the “walls of fame,” the best known one surrounding the hippodrome, situated along the suburban stretch of a major urban auto route, ulica Puławska. This impressive stretch of cement panels is covered with large and stylistically varied pieces, including many collaborative works extending across several sections of the concrete canvas.
Despite the history of the linguistic strife in the city, signature graffiti that saturates Montréal surfaces do not register any linguistic division or display any territorial loyalties. Local politics do not enter the writing space of graffiti art. Political slogans appear rendered in plain type, set apart from the visually complex if not noisy signature graffiti. The main language of writing is hip-hop English, though the texts are minimal: largely limited to names of writers, crews, or places. From the highly visible pieces, both illegal and commissioned murals, names and styles of the most prominent writers become recognizable and identifiable with the local language-based forms and in representations used in specific discourses.

Corpus Inscriptionum

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scene. Commercially commissioned graffiti pieces advertising local business or protecting specific surface territories from “illegitimate” writing are plentiful and highly visible in central spaces of the city. Through such strategies, graffiti writers or crews advertise their services in prominent spaces as well as reinforce their authority. The visual competition that comes from large advertising murals that draw on the hip-hop styles and techniques additionally promotes the idiom of spray art in the city center [28]. Forms of competition with graffiti images abound, as in the city-sponsored wall art meant to protect blank walls from graffiti encroachments. Considerable internal competition between writers adds to the dynamism of the visible urban discourse, but within the richness of modes and styles, graphic space of graffiti writing remains separated from political writing. And notwithstanding the strong presence of some iconic forms that foreground the relationship between image and words (such as the works of OMEN, for example), the Montréal scene appears largely image centered, with signatures (names) forming the dominant visible linguistic form [17].

[29] The surface of Warsaw is covered in commemorative inscriptions of collective history and explanatory words [30]. Graffiti contributes to this visible text because although stylistically varied, it is relentlessly wordy (Chmielewska, 2005a) [31]. Even graphically elaborate pieces often contain texts, if only names that are not chosen for their graphic impact but culturally specific pseudonyms or captions referencing the local cultural scene. Boundaries between text and graphic elements seem fluid. Many pieces are narrative storyboards or social commentaries employing language games (whether phonetic or graphic), with the English language entering the graphic space in slogans, word games, and profanities [32]. Spelling mistakes are as frequent as phonetic puns, making language(s) palpable and bringing the sound (and its varied cultural rendering or accents) into the visual landscape (Chmielewska, 2005a). The local history of public contestation is strongly present here, with symbols of the wartime inscriptions drawn into the contemporary subcultural or current political confrontations [33]. Even if visually arresting, signature pieces do not appear frequently enough for the
writer’s name or style become recognized by the broader audience\[34]. What is visible in the central parts of the city are competing missives, messages, fragments of conversations. The graphic space of graffiti here seems to be defined by largely language-centered manifestations \[35a] \[35b].

**Discourse**

Examining the literature on graffiti also reveals local differences. The Montréal scene has been explored extensively in books, dissertations, and journal articles (Bilodeau, 1996; Demers et al., 1987, 1989; Gauthier, 1997). The focus of these works could be generally characterised as split between the ethnographic analysis of hip-hop culture and the largely iconographic recounting of other wall writings, the first probing the (sub)cultural and sociological dimensions of the phenomenon (and not necessarily attending to its formal characteristics) and the second documenting the marks of contestation or reveling in the antiaesthetics of the visual noise on public walls. Despite the richness of the visual material *in situ*, still no book of images explores the specific aesthetics of Montréal signature graffiti. Also, although signature graffiti here is overtly studied as a local phenomenon (with its specific history and actors), it is not examined in relation to the issues of national and linguistic identity. Paradoxically, then, in the milieu permeated by language politics, the hip-hop English on Montréal walls may not be seen as disruptive of local Francophone identity. Although voices of individual graffiti writers are often considered (and the names of prominent writers frequent local media), the common language of signature graffiti and its fit into the local linguistic scene has yet to be addressed.

The iconography of the scholarship focused on graffiti forms an important part of the discourse. The visual rhetoric of books on graffiti could be seen as reflective of the focus of interest in the phenomenon as well as indicative of hierarchies of importance assigned to various themes and approaches to the subject. Close reading of cover images of texts and the general treatment of images within texts on graffiti could yield an additional insight into the local scene. As a prelude to a larger study that includes the visual analysis of sources on graffiti, I offer here the briefest reflection on one selected image for each site. In each case, the selection was motivated by the atypical characteristic of the particular book’s focus, though the cover image in each case remains congruent with what could be seen as a typical treatment of graffiti in that particular local context. The cover image of *Les murs de la ville. Les graffitis de Montréal*, an uncharacteristic work that offers a
complex anthropological and linguistic analysis of Montréal graffiti, nevertheless demonstrates typical considerations: an image of textual graffiti, an assertion of the local focus (Bilodeau 1996). The words of the title contain a subtle piece of evidence of the linguistic dimension of the phenomenon: the term graffiti “translated” into the French takes on a doubly plural form, les graffitis. Still, signature graffiti is not indexed here in any way.

Contemporary graffiti in Warsaw, despite much public discussion that it generates, has not been thought of as a site-specific phenomenon warranting books of images or local history. Furthermore, academic publications on Polish graffiti seem ambivalent toward the subject of hip-hop, focusing mainly on the inscriptions that are explicitly textual. Much scholarship is devoted to the analysis of the language of graffiti as reflective of the sociopolitical landscape, of changes in colloquial forms of speech and its emotional content, use of language games, dialect, and foreign-language forms (Chmielewska, 2005a; Guz, 2001; Sawaniewska & Moch, 2000; Zimny, 1995). Signature graffiti is largely set aside as a specific phenomenon of imported youth culture (Sulima, 2002). The attention to aesthetics seems limited to a strong critique of visual chaos or to calls for protection of the public “image” of urban space. And comments on the phenomenon are solicited from important cultural figures, not from the individual graffiti writers (Gregorowicz, 1991). The cover image of, again, an atypical text that offers an iconographic survey of graffiti, Polskie zmory, is still indicative of the attention to language and national rather than local identity (Gregorowicz, 1991). There is a language game here, so emblematic of Polish wall art: The title plays on the word mury (walls) reworked into zmory (nightmares). Representing the act of overwriting, the image is stylistically conflicted in its referencing both spray art and Polish art history. The image of the brick wall with the crossed-out and written-over title is dominated by the traditional painting tools (brushes) and the figure referencing the widely recognized patriotic painting by Jan Matejko—an iconic figure of Stańczyk, a legendary court jester. No references to signature graffiti are present.

Coda

[36] Signature graffiti contain complex tensions between naming and pointing, between image and text, and between the specific and the general. These tensions are played out against the particular context of the city. Although a graffito remains an individual mark, the ubiquity of its collective form asserts disquieting sameness, normative visual contestation, and the rigid stylistic canon that often overpowers local details. A graffito is site specific even if its placement may seem arbitrary. By taking place, it designates its context marking a spatial entity with the individual trace. By taking place, it makes itself public, taking position within the larger visual sphere and its immediate discourse [37]. On one hand, graffiti is routinely employed to evoke singularity, authenticity, and uniqueness; on the other, it is typically examined as a general phenomenon. The use of the plural form graffiti as a collective noun already
suggests a propensity to typify, generalize, and abstract. The term has been adopted in many languages but has lost some of its general sense since it has come to denote the specific contemporary phenomenon of youth contestation and the attendant stylistic norms of expression rooted in hip-hop culture. Prominent in the visual field, hip-hop graffiti colonizes both the conceptual and lexical parameters associated with wall writing—drawing the discourse to itself, its imagery, and practices and away from its roots in inscription and its relation to language expression [38].

The difference in the positioning of the subject of graffiti within the disciplinary discourses may suggest the dissimilar role assigned to the context of language in the intellectual traditions of the two places considered, Montréal and Warsaw. Within the methodological approaches persistent in Anglo-American visual and cultural studies, graffiti as any other cultural text is typically viewed through the lens calibrated by structural linguistics and thus marked by the absence of theoretical attention to the specific, while at the same time determined to draw out the personal and the marginalized aspects of cultural identities. Montréal is an interesting case of a North American city as its contested linguistic territory offers a potential for semiotic reflection and drawing on the substantial work on materiality of writing, signature and (urban) graphic surface present in French-language scholarship (Harris 1995, 2004; Fraenkel 2002). In the Central/Eastern European approaches to culture—grounded in different linguistic, semiotic, and ethnographic traditions—the focus on philology, cultural and linguistic anthropology, foregrounds the spatial, phonetic, and contextual dimensions of inscriptions and, thus, their locality. Warsaw, standing in for a Central/Eastern European city—though no assertion on its representative character has been made here—provides a possibility for consideration of shifting geographies of knowledge and suggesting a potential for insight derived from places whose cultures may be traditionally considered as derivative (Chmielewska 2005a).

[39] Neither of the two local contexts, however—neither the “word-based” Warsaw landscape nor the “image-centred” Montréal graffiti scene (if we follow the shorthand used for the visual analysis of the urban context)—take interest in drawing the signature graffiti into the discourse on language [40] [41]. Yet it is the signature graffiti in its relation to the contemporary urban space and the presence of other wall writing that questions many assumptions on the nature of writing, language, and image. It is signature graffiti, with its incessantly declarative presence and its preoccupation with its name, that throws into sharp relief the complexities of asserting identity within the urban visual sphere. Hip-hop graffiti is a significant force shaping the contemporary visual landscape and inflecting the cultural identities of places with its potent visual language. As such it has become an important agent of cultural globalization, of colonizing the visual sphere by writing over the local detail. It needs to be
examined in its specific effects on places and in its unique encroachments into the visible local languages as well as in its impact on the scholarship itself.

By focusing on the place of graffiti in this discussion, I have attempted to reconcile the often separate treatment afforded signature graffiti and other inscriptions, graphic and linguistic signs simultaneously present in the urban visual landscape. A graffito is a topo-sensitive language sign that points to itself while designating the local surface and referencing the discourse that surrounds it [42]. Considering jointly the expressive gesture of writing and the semiotic dimensions of its trace necessitates probing the way each mark relates to its locale. An inscription—whether a slogan, stylized signature or an icon—is connected with the specific history of protest, contestation, and subversion framed by the locality [43]. Nothing that takes place in the public sphere remains a private gesture with no political or cultural meanings. Writing carries in its graphic trace iconic significance, and no image is innocent of linguistic resonance (Chmielewska, 2005a).

[44] Examining signature graffiti in relation to specific contexts can yield important insights into that which lies beyond the frame of the image—in the outer surfaces of the urban iconosphere and the entirety of texts and languages of discourse in which graffiti as a phenomenon is immersed[45]. The family resemblances that Brassaï has referred to, invoked in the quotation opening this essay, may be actually misleading. Brassaï himself points out the local circumstance of writing (2002, p. 151): It is “the wall”—for him, the Parisian wall—that defines the writing as locally specific, as seemingly rendered with one hand, as having significant stylistic unity, recognizable and even characteristic of the particular locale. It is the specific context, however, that allows us to interpret and understand writing, a phenomenon that is not separable from its substrate, from its place of articulation, and from discourses in which that place is immersed. Bühler (1934/1990) posited that “most important and most interesting field of a language sign is its context: the individual sign appears in company with its fellows, and the company proves to have effect as a surrounding field” (p. 176). And I will argue with Jonathan Culler (1988), who speaks of “heuristically simplifying presumptions of the context” (p. 9), that it is often the material context, not framing, that renders the analysis more complex [46] [1].
   Source: © Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, Photo by Michel Legendre.

2. ARRET sign modified to spell out “ART,” Montréal.
   Source: Photo by the author (2002).

3. Signature graffiti in St. Henrie, Montréal.


5. A billboard advertising the opening of the Museum of Warsaw Uprising (Muzeum Powstania), Warsaw. The advertising campaign used the most recognizable symbol of the Uprising, the “tag” of the Polish resistance, interlocked letter PW.
   Source: Photo by the author (2004).


7. Fragment of a piece from Under Pressure graffiti convention, Montréal.
   Source: Photo by the author (2000).

8. A graffiti piece along Puławska Street, Warsaw.
   Source: Photo by the author (1998).

9. One of the artists participating in Under Pressure graffiti convention, Montréal.
   Source: Photo by the author (1999).

10. Tags, Vieux Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (1998).

11. A graffiti piece along Puławska Street, Warsaw.
    Source: Photo by the author (1998).

12. DEFENCE AFFICHER (Post No Bills) appears from underneath the weathered graffiti piece. On the hoarding on the Biblioteque Nationale, rue Berrie, Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (2002).

13. The iconosphere around Ste. Catherine, one of the sites of Under Pressure graffiti convention, Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (2001).

14. Textures of Montréal wall surface, rue Ste Catherine.
    Source: Photo by the author (2001).

15. Complex surfaces of Montréal graffiti, rue Ste Catherine East.
    Source: Photo by the author (2001).

16. A piece by KOPS crew, Carre St. Louis, Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (2001).

17. Mural by Phil, St. Laurent and Pine, Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (1999).

18. Commissioned graffiti by Waldman’s fish market, Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (2000).

19. 1999 Under Pressure graffiti convention, a fragment of the piece by OTHER, rue Ste. Catherine, Montréal.
    Source: Photo by the author (1998).

20. Graffiti in Smolna Street, near Nowy Świat, Warsaw.
    Source: Photo by the author (2003).

21. A “throw up” in Grójecka Street, Warsaw.
    Source: Photo by the author (2003).

22. The graffiti wall along Puławska Street, Warsaw.
    Source: Photo by the author (2004).
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
   Source: Photo by the author (1999).
26. An anarchist election slogan, Montréal: VOTE BIEN VOTE RIEN. (Good vote is no vote). 
   Source: Photo by the author (2002).
27. One of the signatures along Waldman’s fish market, SAEZ, Montréal. 
   Source: Photo by the author (1998).
28. An advertising mural by Phil, Carre St Louis, Montréal. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2000).
29. One of Warsaw’s many commemorative plates indexing the traumatic events of World War II, Leszno, Warsaw. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
30. Part of the City Information System. Stencil graffiti comments on religious zealotry, modified to obscure the original message, “Bądź wola Twoja a nie (niewola)” Krakowskie Przedmieście, Warsaw. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
   Source: Photo by the author (2004).
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
33. Graffiti in Puławska Street contains political commentary on SLD Party, appeared during the election campaign, Warsaw. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2004).
34. Graffiti in Puławska Street, titled “Siegać do dna” (“Reaching the Bottom”). The piece contains social commentary on alcoholism. 
   Source: Photo by the author.
35. Graffiti in Puławska Street contains political commentary during the election campaign: Miller górę. Górnicy dołem! (Miller is up. Miners are down.) Warsaw. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
36. A piece by OMEN, rue Maisonneuve, Montréal. 
   Source: Photo by the author (1999).
37. A piece by OTHER, rue Duluth, Montréal. 
   Source: Photo by Brian Ray (2000).
   Source: Photo by Adrian Buitenhuys (2003).
   Source: Photo by the author (2003).
40. Graffiti by OMEN, the site of York theatre, rue Ste. Catherine, Montréal. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2000).
41. Graffiti in Dolinka Służewiecka, a commentary on the advertising campaign that uses graffiti idiom to sell mobile phones, Warsaw (see [42]). The campaign slogan plays on a greeting word Heyah! The anglicized version of a Polish greeting Hej! or Hejel in a slang is reworked here to Huyah! which is a play on the word that is verbal version of the middle finger. 
   Source: Photo by the author (2004).
42. One of the many billboards of an advertising campaign for a mobile telephone company. The company is using graffiti aesthetics and hop-hop language to appeal to young customers. Warsaw. Graffiti shown in [41] responds to this advertising campaign. Source: Photo by the author (2004).


46. A piece by züsk & hiro, Wrocław, Poland. Street art calendar, June 2005, http://vlepvnet .bzzz.net/index_uk.html Source: Photo by züsk/gapa and hiro82

Notes

1. By pieces I am referring to elaborate graffiti works, or “master pieces.”

2. All “writing” was rendered in one hand, that of one of the artists on staff at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Harry Symons, tasked with creating representations of local street textures and urban texts for Strategies urbaines (Gironnay, 1994).

3. Here, the reader needs to consider both the visual impact of this simulated messiness within the normally pristine space of this high temple of modernist purity and the simulated spontaneity and plurality of this graffiti wallpaper: carefully designed authenticity.

4. Montréal graffiti has strong political roots in the separatist movement dating back to the ’60s and overlaid with the American graffiti arriving via Paris in the ’90s. Around the time of the 1995 Referendum, the volume of political graffiti increased considerably; however, the surface of the city was heavily saturated with hip-hop graffiti.

5. I am using the terms hip-hop graffiti and signature graffiti interchangeably.

6. Warsaw graffiti is rooted in the history of national resistance during World War II and again later during the political opposition of the ’80s. Often references to the symbols known from the wartime graffiti are made to strengthen the visual impact of the message. No substantial work on the history or the present problematic of Warsaw graffiti has been published.

7. A comprehensive City Information System (Miejski System Informacji) in Warsaw includes uniform markers of heritage sites. Each sign contains a brief historical note. This remaining graffiti, contesting the German occupation of Warsaw during World War II is enfolded into the system of heritage sites of the city and thus validated as an artifact of cultural importance.

8. The 1989 monument on Plac Krasińskich features a rendering of a wartime Warsaw wall covered with official proclamations (Obwieszczienia), posters, and graffiti. The symbol of wartime resistance, interlocked letters P and W, is a “tag”: Painted on walls of the city, it was a sign of presence and can be seen throughout the city rendered in various forms: free standing, sculpted, carved in commemorative plates, and so on.

9. One whole room at the Historical Museum of Warsaw (Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Warszawy) is devoted to the history of subversive writing during the Nazi occupation of the city, 1939-1945. Graffiti works recreated there—stencils, tags, subversive slogans—are all well-known to the post-war generations whose acts of political resistance often drew upon the earlier tradition (Ploski & Ancypo, 1987). Recently opened Museum of the Uprising (Muzeum Powstania) incorporates wartime tagging in its branding (www.1944.pl).

10. Considering the penalty for graffiti transgression is not insignificant here, as in wartime Warsaw, the act (a gesture of resistance to the occupant) carried a death sentence and, during the times of the political opposition in communist times, arrest and prosecution.
11. Forms of language contestation and semiotic and aural play are crucial aspects of hip-hop culture. Here, I am limiting my focus to the visual language of hip-hop as manifest in signature graffiti.

12. Of course, signature graffiti is rendered in nonalphabetic languages as well. Here, I restrict myself to the predominant writing system used for hip-hop signatures, the Latin alphabet. Graffiti in Cyrillic alphabet or Arabic writing, for example, is set aside for the purposes of this essay.

13. For Brassäi, however, graffiti had no linguistic dimensions; it was an expression of primal (prelinguistic?) urges, practiced by children and revered for its primitive expressiveness.

14. See graffiti culture’s references to and representations of its practitioners on Web sites and zines (Under Pressure, for example).

15. Although Elkins (2000) claims that close reading is not possible, I take his assertions as a call for the necessity of affording images (and not only art historical images as he argued in The Domain of Images) the same kind of scrutiny that is typically reserved for texts.

16. This discussion then is not intended as a text with illustrations, neither is it composed as a visual essay punctuated with wordy commentary. The difficulty of and with this format will already make a point on the inadequacy of our modes of presentation of the argument(s) on the visual.

17. By contrast, the text remains—together with works of Roman Jakobson and Roman Ingarten—fundamental to Polish semiotics of place and image and soundly present in references and theoretical approaches in the literature on visual culture. A number of Polish works referencing Bühler’s (1934/1990) concepts could be cited here (Chmielewska, 2005a). The enduring interest in his theory in continental Europe is evident in its 1999 third edition issued by the original publisher, Lucius & Lucius Verlaggesellschaft, Stuttgart, as well as the recent 2004 Polish translation. Other sources referencing Bühler are few: Paul Carter has a brief mention (2004, p. 184). James Elkins (2003) laments the neglect a number of semiotic theories suffered (p. 5).


19. The anonymous reviewer of this article and his or her questioning of my “eschewing the focus on authorship” has helped me to strengthen my resolve about articulating this point.

20. There is no paucity of studies that focus on specific local and highly complex processes related to graffiti production, or actors involved in the practices of urban marking, including studies of gang-related territorial marking, such as the classic 1974 work by urban geographers Ley and Cybrinski, for example, or, highly attentive to locality, recent work by Keith (1998) and others. A number of studies focus on particular local issues as well as photographic collections of graffiti from specific places (New York, Los Angeles, Melbourne). What is rare is an attention to the singular mark with its unique context as well as the visual analysis.

21. One local name attained a considerable fame: Józef Tkaczuk, but this was a constructed local mythical persona, much like the legendary Kilroy, rather than an individual writer (Sulima, 2002).

References


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