



Born USA, 1978

Evan Roth is an American artist based in Paris who visualizes, subverts and archives transient and often unseen moments in public space, popular culture and the Internet. He applies a hacker philosophy to an art practice that often involves technology, humor and activism. His notable pieces include L.A.S.E.R. Tag and LED Throwies (Graffiti Research Lab), White Glove Tracking, EyeWriter, Graffiti Analysis and a collaboration with Jay-Z on the first open source rap video. Roth's work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art NYC and has been exhibited widely in the Americas, Europe and Asia, including the Centre Pompidou, the Kunsthalle Wien, the Tate, the Fondation Cartier and the front page of Youtube. Roth has received numerous awards for his work, including the Golden Nica from Prix Ars Electronica, Rhizome/The New Museum commissions, the Future Everything Award, the inaugural Transmediale Open Web Award, the Design Museum London's Designs of the Year and the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award.

Roth is co-founder of the Graffiti Research Lab and the Free Art & Technology Lab (F.A.T. Lab), a web based, open source research and development lab. Roth and his work have been featured in multiple outlets, including NPR, the New York Times, Liberation, Time magazine, CNN, the Guardian, ABC News, Esquire and Juxtapoz.

To find Roth's work online, just google "bad ass mother fucker".

CURRENTS

Q&A
Evan Roth, an Award-Winning Man of Many Tags

In street-culture circles, Evan Roth is already a bold-face name, with a résumé that includes collaborating with Jay-Z on a music video and creating a computerized analysis of graffiti motion.

He also helped found the Graffiti Research Lab, an artist group that has undertaken projects like tagging the Brooklyn Bridge with an (erasable) laser and tossing projectile LEDs onto city buildings.

Mr. Roth, 34, is being honored this year by the design community as a winner of a Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award.

John C. Jay, global executive creative director and partner at Wieden + Kennedy and the jury chairman for the awards, said Mr. Roth was chosen in the interaction design category, in part, because “he blurs the distinctions between technology, design and art.”

He cited as an example the EyeWriter. The device, which Mr. Roth helped design, allowed a paralyzed graffiti artist named Tempt1 to draw with his eyes. “He’s definitely a very strong problem solver,” Mr. Jay said of Mr. Roth. “That’s at the heart of the design.”

Mr. Roth, who has an M.F.A. from Parsons The New School for Design and lived in New York for several years, spoke about his work on the phone from his home in Paris.

Do you think of yourself as a designer?

I consider myself an artist, but I do see the connection to design. I think my work tends to address dual audiences. It has one life that happens within white cubes in art galleries. But I also have interest in reaching a completely separate online



OWEN FRANKEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

IN HIS ELEMENT Evan Roth, at rest in Paris, has won a Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award.

audience. I like when my work appears in galleries and on the front page of YouTube.

Has YouTube been important in getting your work seen, especially the videos you post of street art projects like L.A.S.E.R. Tag?

It’s not about YouTube; it’s about the Internet. I hadn’t seen a Banksy piece out in the street until 10 years after I was introduced to his work. But seeing one piece on the Web was enough to make me quit my job and go back to graduate school.

I understand when people have specific ideas about how certain parts of art shouldn’t be mediated. That it’s meant to be experienced out in the street. But the influence we can have on society as artists now vastly outweighs those arguments.

Much of your work involves subverting technology and the Internet. Do you know how to write code?

Yes, I know how to write code. But I find it taxing and boring. I’m not fun to be around when I’m writing code.

My relationship with technol-

ogy is more a fascination with the people writing code. The hacker communities. I’m not talking about phone scandals and e-mail hacking. When I look at graffiti artists, I see hackers. I see a community of people who are making their own tools

An artist who shows in galleries and on YouTube.

and subverting systems to tell stories.

How did the Jay-Z “Brooklyn Go Hard” video happen?

I got a call from a former classmate who’s now working at a firm. He remembered this project I did in graduate school at Parsons. He said, “Can you make a Jay-Z video in three days?” Hell, yes. I canceled Thanksgiving that year. My wife was like, “I understand. Do

what you have to do. I’ll handle the food.”

Are you interested in doing more traditional products, like designing furniture?

I wouldn’t be against that. I came from architecture and worked in it for three years before I started dabbling on the Web. But not having money influence design decisions was liberating to me. It got disappointing to see great design ideas be shelved because the materials were considered too expensive. I don’t know if I can go back. STEVEN KURUTZ

The other winners of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Awards are Richard Saul Wurman (lifetime achievement), Janine Benyus (design mind), Design That Matters (corporate and institutional achievement), Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects (architecture design), Rebeca Méndez (communication design), Thom Browne (fashion design), Clive Wilkinson Architects (interior design), Stoss Landscape Urbanism (landscape architecture), Scott Wilson (product design).

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EVAN ROTH

INTERVIEW BY ALEXANDER TARRANT / SELF-PORTRAIT BY EVAN ROTH

EVAN ROTH HAS A SELF-ADMITTED BRANDING PROBLEM. I HAD SEEN MOST OF HIS PROJECTS OVER THE YEARS, BUT DIDN'T CONNECT THE DOTS THAT IDENTIFIED THEM AS ALL CONCEIVED, IN WHOLE OR IN PART, FROM THE SAME GUY: MICHAEL JACKSON'S GIANT WHITE GLOVE, LASER TAG AND LED THROWIES (WITH THE GRAFFITI RESEARCH LAB), TSA COMMUNICATION, IN WHICH HE SPOKE TO AIRPORT SECURITY SCREENERS WITH METAL SIGNAGE, AND MOST RECENTLY GRAFFITI ANALYSIS AND GRAFFITI TAXONOMY, STUDIES IN THE TYPOGRAPHY, GESTURE, AND MOTION OF GRAFFITI.

He speaks of a “handshake” moment between technologists and graffiti artists, while documenting the graffiti movement with computer code, the same way Martha Cooper did with photographs, and Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant did with film in *Style Wars*.

Another overriding goal is to promote a dialogue about open source code and technology in modern pop culture, which just might be a case of convincing practitioners and consumers that giving your ideas away for free can have a giant impact. Just ask Jay-Z how releasing his a cappella “source code” for *The Black Album* worked out for him.
—Alexander Tarrant

Alexander Tarrant: You have graffiti culture and

you have hacker Internet culture. Aren't they the same thing with a different tool?

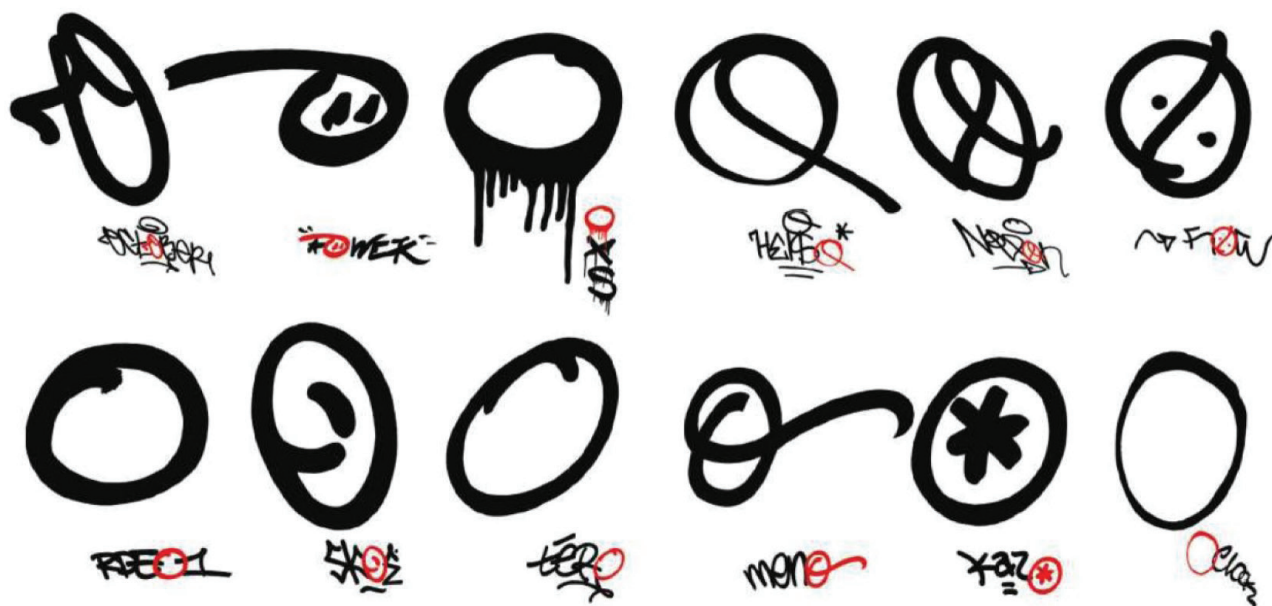
Evan Roth: There are differences, obviously, but to me the main similarity, in sort of a general sense, is that computer hackers take a digital system and perform some small alteration to change the general intent of that system. For example, studying someone's website and understanding the structure of the website and finding a loophole to change it, making a small alteration that kind of flips the whole idea.

With graffiti and street art, and everything surrounding, it's really the same thing. You have people finding systems that are in the city as they figure out how to tweak

them so they totally change what was there before. You see it with traditional graffiti like bombing and tags, but you also see it with a lot of street artists, where they're hacking different systems, whether it's billboards or it's telephone booths.

The subway is a system. I watch *Style Wars* and I think about how they're hacking the city, how they find this system and figure out a way to hack it, and now they're spreading their artwork in a huge scale across the city.

I don't know if graffiti writers would hear that and immediately see the connection to computer hacking, and vice versa. But I think when I'm hanging out in those two communities I see the same people. I hear





the same sort of thoughts, and so a lot of the projects I do are about trying to get them in the same room more often.

Are you the ambassador, the Benjamin Franklin of graffiti and hacking? You live in Paris and everything.

One of the slides I keep coming back to when I give talks is this handshake moment where hackers meet graffiti writers. If I'm talking generally about my work, I'm into hacking and I'm into graffiti, but also I'm sort of interested in spreading ideas outside of the small rooms where the discussions happen and getting these ideas spread into alternative audiences and a wider general pop culture.

How do you accomplish that? What's your strategy? Rap music?

Yeah, man, exactly. It sounds silly, but that's a big one.

In the FAT (Free Art and Technology) Lab mission statement it says, "Release early, often, and with rap music." What's the idea with that?

It's a take from an open source dictum, which is "release early and often," that comes from Linux culture. When Linux and open source culture was developing it was a pretty revolutionary idea that you should be releasing a lot, like not when something is ready, not when it's polished and clean, but you should be releasing all the time. Even ugly code, get it out there. So the work I do and a lot of what I do, I'm really into the open source community and trying to rep them a little bit.

At the same time I'm not a Linux programmer, so I feel like my role is more like you're saying, the ambassador. The phrase "release early, often, and with rap music" is sort of meant to be funny, but the serious point is about how this overlap between open source culture and popular culture hasn't happened all that much.

You don't really hear sitcom televisions talking about Linux, right? So a lot of the work I'm doing is trying to get that to happen, trying to get rappers talking about source code instead of talking about how many inches their rims are. That's the ultimate goal.

Like the video I did for the Jay-Z track that was an official Jay-Z release. At the end of the video, him letting me sneak in the "download source code here," even though it was only for two seconds and it was at the end of the video, for me was a huge win, getting source code talked about in mainstream popular culture circles.

Was he personally into that? Did you talk to him and say, "Hey, this is the idea behind this"?

The story behind that one: it was a super-super fast production to completion cycle, like three days. Long story short I did it, I completed the video, and at the end I intentionally put that in without telling anybody. It went through one person, then to his people, then to him, and then they came back to me like, "What is that?" I wasn't in direct contact with Mr Carter at this point at all, but what I compared it to when he released the a capella track to *The Black Album*.

You spoke his language.

That was like the source code that spawned *The Gray Album*. If you're talking about remix, it's the pinnacle. So that went back and they were like, "Okay, cool." It happened and then kind of took off.

Perfect, to say that the a capella is his musical source code and he can get down with that.

Yeah. I heard he was super into it.

What was open source about the video? Was it the placement of the type, or was the engine that built it the open source?

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Basically I'd made a drawing tool, and that drawing tool is what I used to make the video.

It makes like a half tone of typography?

It makes it so you can click and drag with your mouse, and instead of drawing a line it will draw type. So in that video the only type coming out was Brooklyn. The song was all about Brooklyn, the hook was spelling out Brooklyn, and so the idea was drawing a portrait of the artist using words from the lyrics.

So the character is based on acceleration?

Yeah exactly, the quicker you move the faster it spits out.

And you use that code again? The Graffiti Markup Language has that idea in it, capturing the acceleration.

The Graffiti Analysis Project is all about capturing gesture and movement in the end. The idea behind that project was about making data visualizations of the motion and trying to really express and be playful with the movement of the graffiti. That is something that as an outsider you never get to see. I was hanging out with graffiti writers more and more, and I started realizing that watching them do this motion that they've done a million times, probably when they're dreaming they're doing



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it, watching someone move in a way that they're so trained and honed and practiced, there's something really interesting about that. The same way you feel watching a dancer perform, you know?

I wanted to make something surrounding the graffiti community that could show some things that I think are fascinating about it, or that I think graffiti writers think are interesting about it. You come outside, see a flower box, and you're like, "awe man, that doesn't even look that good and that box is ruined now," but the idea is that if you can show people the motion behind it, you might be able to provide them a way of understanding. They might still hate that it's on their flower box, but at least they could be like, oh, I get it.

Personally as part of this project, have you gained any insight that you haven't had before into graffiti? What was your affinity for graffiti to begin with? Did you grow up doing it a little bit or did you just hang out with guys that did?

Not at all, I kind of came from the other way. I went to undergrad for architecture, was working in architecture for a few years in Los Angeles. Then I wound up wanting to do more media, more art, so I quit that job and went back to grad school in New York. It was in moving to NY that I fell in love with graffiti. I gave up the car in LA and started walking

everywhere. I was living in Brooklyn for the first time seeing all these tags.

I was walking to school a lot, so I'd go from downtown Brooklyn over the bridge into Lower Manhattan and you just pass so many tags. I started getting fascinated by it around 2003, when street art was really starting to take off, and the *New York Times* was writing articles about it and everyone was talking about street art. I loved the street art movement too, and I had a lot of inspiration from that, but I felt like the topic of graffiti writing was really getting left behind with all this excitement about street art. People were acting like graffiti was this word you didn't even want associated with street art because it brings it down. "Oh don't worry, it isn't graffiti, this is street art." So I wanted to work with graffiti writers and do something that was a little bit new, and maybe something that would bring in new audiences for it.

I was dabbling with writing myself and putting up work. I tried that and the more I learn about graffiti, the more I understand the amount of effort it takes to become respected, even locally; it's just insane, really a craft of obsessive dedication. I totally respect that, but also understand personally that it wasn't the path for me.

So I started hanging out with graffiti writers more and talking with them and writing software and showing them software and going back and forth and looking at how the system could work. That's where I also started realizing there's a really compelling history of documentation, and big players being documentarians within graffiti. Like the movie *Style Wars*, it's cheesy but seeing that movie for me was a big key into graffiti in the beginning. And Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's *Subway Art* book. I grew up in the Midwest, and hear about a lot of people who grew up way outside of any really big city with graffiti, seeing *Subway Art* was what got them stealing cans from the hardware store.

I love the graffiti community and was thinking someone should be documenting the movement. Someone should be archiving things, not just in photos and video, but someone should be putting this into code. I've been doing other work, but that's a project I've been working on ever since way back, this continuing effort of evolving the capturing system and the way it's archived.

And now that has turned into the .gml, Graffiti Markup Language format? It feels like a lot of times you're creating a medium, would you say? Now Tempt can write with his eyeball with Eyewriter. And with the TSA Communication project, the medium is an Xray machine, Laser Tag, where you're drawing at a large scale with a laser. You create these platforms.

Like the type one for Jay-Z, in the beginning that was about making a tool, not about making a finished product. Which is why when he called, I could make it in three days because I already had this platform. The white glove-tracking project that's totally about a platform. My hand in that project is unseeable. I made a website where people who weren't me could track the data, then I released that data, and then people that weren't me visualized the data. Awesome. I love that, throwing that system in motion and not knowing what's going to come out. In the end I lent a hand but also all these other people had their hands in it, too. GML is the exact same way.

So much development has happened in such a small amount of time since making this small change from it being about open source software to it being about open data. It's a hard thing to make sound exciting, I'm dealing now with how to publish this online, and it's really boring to talk about databases and standardized file formats. But then you see some of the projects coming out of it, like the robotic arm that catches the tag. That was a paralyzed graffiti writer. To me it's an awesome story that something can sit in the middle of







C'est graff docteur ?

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10/07/2010 À 00H00

C'est graff docteur ?

CRITIQUE Evan Roth, hacker et artiste américain, développe des applications qui retranscrivent le geste du tagueur.

Par **MARIE LECHNER**

«Ce que je préfère dans le graffiti, c'est le tag. C'est la forme la plus pure de graffiti, la plus abondante, mais aussi la plus mal aimée», dit l'artiste hacker américain, Evan Roth qui se passionne pour ces calligraphies, signatures express griffonnées sur les murs. Et plus précisément pour ce qu'on ne voit pas, c'est-à-dire le geste furtif du tagueur qu'il s'est mis en tête de capturer.

Lui-même n'est pas un pro de la bombe comme il l'admet volontiers. En revanche, il manie habilement le code informatique. Après des études d'architecture, suivi d'une thèse sur «Graffiti et Technologie» à Parsons, l'école new-yorkaise de design, il cofonde le Graffiti Research Lab, qui va renouveler cet art urbain en l'hybridant avec les technologies *«pour faire des graff toujours plus hauts, toujours plus grands»*. Parmi ses inventions, les Throwies, loupottes LED couplées à des aimants et des piles qu'on jette et qui se collent sur le mobilier urbain, ou le Laser Tag qui permet des graffitis monumentaux au laser dans l'espace public.

Evan Roth développe la première version de Graffiti Analysis son analyseur de mouvements, en 2004. Il repère des tags familiers (Hell, Avone, Jesus Saves et Katsu) sur ses trajets et demande aux quatre graffeurs de reproduire leur signature avec un marqueur surmonté d'une lumière, traquée par une caméra.

Un logiciel de son cru récupère, analyse et enregistre les données de mouvement, archivées dans une base de données 000000book.com, libre et ouverte à tous. Les graffeurs sont invités à partager leur style manuel, ce qu'ont déjà fait plusieurs stars comme Seen, Twist, Amaze et Jonone. Une application iPhone permet également de tracer au doigt son propre tag puis de l'envoyer dans l'archive qui compte 10 000 animations en 3D.

Tous les tags créés avec le logiciel sont sauvegardés dans un nouveau standard (le *graffiti markup language*) compatible avec d'autres applications qu'Evan a aidé à développer. Ainsi d'Eye Writer, un dispositif bon marché et open source, qui permet littéralement d'écrire avec les yeux, développé pour TemptOne, graffiti artist atteint d'une sclérose latérale amyotrophique qui le laisse complètement paralysé sauf au niveau des yeux. Grâce à Eye Writer, lauréat du prix Ars electronica cette année, il a pu se remettre à taguer la ville depuis son lit d'hôpital.

Les développeurs sont quant à eux invités à créer de nouvelles applications et visualisations de ces mouvements. L'artiste Golan Levin a utilisé ces données pour faire dessiner ces tags par des robots industriels et Benjamin Gaulon par son Printball, robot armé d'un fusil de paintball qui mitraille les lettres sur les murs. *«Mon objectif est de réunir deux communautés qui, chacune à leur manière, hackent le système, que ce soit dans le code ou le paysage urbain»,* explique Evan Roth.

Il espère aussi renouveler le tag en proposant des formes inattendues *«afin que les gens puissent apprécier la beauté de ces calligraphies avec un œil neuf»*. A la Kunsthalle de Vienne, il vient d'exposer une sculpture 3D d'un tag capturé sur le vif et matérialisé avec une imprimante 3D. *«Une manière de faire entrer clandestinement ces tags illégaux dans le musée.»* Après la version 2.0 présentée à la fondation Cartier en 2009, Evan Roth, installé depuis à Paris, propose ce samedi, pour la clôture du festival Les grands traversés à Bordeaux, une version 3.0, avec des tags projetés qui s'écrivent sur les murs entourés d'un nuage de particules pulsant en fonction des sons environnants

The New York Times

June 25, 2006

ART

High-Tech Graffiti: Spray Paint Is So 20th Century

By GEETA DAYAL

NEW YORK CITY may have given birth to modern-day graffiti art, but how is it keeping up with the times?

Graffiti in its traditional form — involving aerosol cans of spray paint and an inviting flat surface — still dominates on the streets. But online things are evolving quickly.

Techniques are debated in forums, and photos of tags, or signatures, are constantly uploaded and swapped on popular photo-sharing Web sites like flickr.com. Sites like Wooster Collective (woostercollective.com) function as digital galleries and as clearinghouses for street art on an international level.

Now New York has its own center for the study of graffiti technology. The nascent Graffiti Research Lab is masterminded by two tech-minded artists, Evan Roth and James Powderly, and run from the Eyebeam gallery in Chelsea, a nonprofit arts and technology center where both men are fellows.

The purpose of the project is to rethink how people make and look at graffiti and street art, not by making the stuff but by developing tools that graffiti writers could potentially use. "I'm not a graffiti writer," Mr. Powderly, 29, said. "I like to say I'm a graffiti engineer."

Using their odd combination of training — Mr. Powderly's background is in aerospace robotics and NASA-financed Mars missions; Mr. Roth's is in coding, architecture and Web design — they develop new methods of self-expression. These include, so far, a panoply of digital projection techniques, L.E.D.-driven light art and specially written computer programs.

"As more and more people learn to program at a younger age, and computers get cheaper, graffiti is eventually going to have these technological elements as a part of it," Mr. Roth said.

Mr. Roth, 28, is a wunderkind in his tiny but thriving world. A valedictorian of the Parsons School of Design's graduate program in design and technology, he developed a thesis project called Graffiti Analysis, which used sophisticated motion-tracking techniques and custom-written code to analyze and record a graffiti writer's hand movement over time. Working with several graffiti writers, Mr. Roth created a series of striking digital projections of graffiti being "written" at night on various New York buildings. No physical mark is left on the building by this ghostly process, but it looks shockingly real while it's happening.

In a related project, Graffiti Taxonomy, Mr. Roth photographed hundreds of graffiti tags on

the Lower East Side, and created detailed typographic charts of various letters of the alphabet based on the visual data he collected.

A flurry of New York-based graduate thesis projects in recent years have explored new forms of technology-oriented graffiti, including John Geraci's Grafedia, a method of creating hyperlinked graffiti on city streets, and Joshua Kinberg's Bikes Against Bush, which uses text messaging and a custom-built dot-matrix printer connected to a bicycle to print giant chalk letters on the sidewalk.

So far the Graffiti Research Lab's activities include the Electro-Graf, a simple method of using magnetic and conductive paint to embed L.E.D. electronics inside a graffiti piece, surrounding the graffiti with a halo of brilliant light; L.E.D. "throwies," tiny and colorful battery-powered lights attached to magnets, designed to be thrown onto urban surfaces; the Night Writer, an inexpensive device of the kind MacGyver might have used that posts foot-tall messages in glowing L.E.D. lights on metallic surfaces in a single fluid motion; and Jesus 2.0, a recent light sculpture collaboration with the street artist Mark Jenkins of Washington. The lab is also working to refine various digital projection ideas that Mr. Roth explored in his Graffiti Analysis project.

The Graffiti Research Lab's values follow the idea-sharing philosophy of the open source movement: Mr. Roth and Mr. Powderly provide free and detailed online documentation on their Web site (graffitiresearchlab.com) so that anyone can follow — and replicate — their work. Mr. Roth also teaches a popular class at Parsons entitled "Geek Graffiti."

Mr. Roth realizes that eager companies may co-opt the lab's work, although he is strongly anticommercial. "Marketing people went crazy over the project," he said of Graffiti Analysis, "because it's cool and it's big and it's projected in public. They look at Graffiti Analysis and see their company's image inserted in there."

The projects are intentionally designed to be cheap, user-friendly and not illegal. "The kind of stuff I've been doing is intentionally geared to a wider audience," Mr. Roth said. "One of the goals with the Graffiti Research Lab is to try to remove some of the negative connotations that graffiti has. It's an easier pitch to sell to Mom and Dad than getting arrested every night."

A former collaborator on Graffiti Analysis, the graffiti writer Avone, was recently arrested while tagging in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. "These people are taking a lot more risks than we are," Mr. Roth said.

Mr. Roth's interest in studying graffiti and street art blossomed after he moved to New York from Los Angeles. A turning point, he said, was seeing the classic documentary "Style Wars," which immortalized the 1980's face-off between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and graffiti writers. "They were hacking the subway to transport these huge art pieces from borough to borough," Mr. Roth said of the artists. "That movie makes graffiti feel like such a movement."

Studying New York's graffiti soon became his preoccupation. "I did get totally obsessed with it," he said, "to the point where I couldn't walk down the street and have conversations with people without having my gaze sidetracked by a tag. I wouldn't leave the house without a camera."

Graffiti and other forms of street art are gaining recognition in major New York museums. The Museum of Modern Art recently acquired three oversize woodcuts and linoleum cuts by the current street art sensation Swoon; the pieces are being shown as part of the exhibition "Since 2000: Printmaking Now," now on view. On Friday the [Brooklyn Museum](#) is to open "Graffiti," a major exhibition of large-scale graffiti paintings that includes works by 80's trailblazers like Lady Pink (Sandra Fabara) and NOC 167 (Melvin Samuels Jr.).

The M.T.A. recently proposed a \$25 million plan to combat acid-based window etchings, also called scratchiti, on subway cars. The agency is also considering the use of surveillance cameras to track down graffiti writers.

"There's a strong crackdown, and gentrification changes the streets," said Marc Schiller, the founder of Wooster Collective. "But it's a great time to be creative in general. Creativity is so accessible now. On the street and off, on the Web, the barriers to being creative have never been lower."

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The New York Times

August 12, 2007

URBAN TACTICS

The Writing's on the Wall. (The Writing's Off the Wall.)

By JOSHUA YAFFA

A FEW minutes into the opening reception for an exhibit on the intersection of design and technology at the Chelsea Art Museum, one of the pieces caught fire. The installation, called “Saws,” accidentally ignited when one of the work’s three chainsaws became caught on a stripped extension cord that dangled over a metal sheet on the floor.

Propelled by smoke and dust, the crowd emptied out onto West 22nd Street, where they were met with another curious sight. An oversize tricycle was rounding the corner, weighed down with a video camera, a laptop computer, a digital projector and, attached to its frame with bungee cords, two loudspeakers playing “Doobie Ashtray” by the Houston rapper Devin the Dude.

The cyclist was a 30-year-old robotics engineer named James Powderly, who, among other projects, once helped develop a remote-controlled arm for [NASA](#)’s Mars rover program. Alongside the cycle walked Evan Roth, a 28-year-old artist whose graduate thesis at Parsons the [New School](#) for Design analyzed graffiti tags as a source of mathematical data.

In the fall of 2005, the two formed an entity called the Graffiti Research Lab, a nonprofit design studio with the mission of producing tools for urban communication. The cycle is their latest invention, and its appearance in Chelsea was its official New York debut.

As Mr. Powderly neared the museum’s entrance, he jumped off the cycle and pointed it toward a bare stretch on a garage door across the street. Mr. Roth pulled a laser pointer from his pocket, and as he moved the laser’s green dot across the wall, a line of what looked like thick, drippy paint lit up its surface, roughly following the motion of his hand.

But what seemed like an illegal tag was in fact a projection, an ephemeral splash of digital graffiti that would vanish with a flick of a switch on the cycle’s gas-powered generator.

“You want to try?” Mr. Roth asked the growing crowd behind him. He handed the laser pointer to a young woman standing nearby. She nodded, hesitant but curious.

The cycle is designed to be an accessible, almost playful simulacrum of street tagging, giving passers-by a whiff of the thrill of posting a message in places they’re not supposed to. It is what its creators call a gateway graffiti experience. The idea is to put the tools for unfiltered, unsanctioned public expression in the hands of those who might otherwise shy away from grabbing a spray can or a paint marker.

By night’s end, several dozen people had used the laser to scribble personal messages, squealing with amazement each time the projected beam of light appeared on the wall.

The first request to use the bike came a week later from Critical Mass, the bicycle activist group, which wanted to use the device for one of its rides through Brooklyn. On a Friday night in spring, Mr. Powderly found himself pedaling the hulking cycle across the Williamsburg Bridge and onto South Fifth Street, to the Williamsburg park where the biking group starts its monthly ride.

Joining the crowd of cyclists, Mr. Powderly followed them as they moved through the honking streets of Brooklyn. In search of a spot to project their graffiti, they settled on the handball courts of McCarren Park in Greenpoint.

Mr. Powderly positioned the cycle to face the court's gray concrete wall. Within a few minutes, someone had drawn a detailed sketch of a bicycle, and another person had traced an outline of an American flag.

"These people really get it," Mr. Powderly said. "It's not just about getting a message up — there are plenty of ways to do that. This is really about getting a community together."

In the months since, Mr. Powderly and Mr. Roth have used the tricycle to write graffiti for a hip-hop music video and handed it over for a night to an organization that is calling for the impeachment of Vice President [Dick Cheney](#).

They have also gone out with people from the New York graffiti collective All City Crew, several of whose members have been arrested in recent months on charges of criminal trespassing and vandalism. Last Sunday, Mr. Powderly and Mr. Roth took the cycle to the Brooklyn Bridge, where 2esae, a member of All City Crew who is facing trial in the fall, used the laser to write on the base of the bridge for several hours.

Many of the cycle's projecting missions are documented in videos posted on the Graffiti Research Lab Web site. At the end of the video from the Critical Mass ride, a typed message flashes brightly across the screen.

"Do you need to say something really big and really loud?" it asks in bold, all-capital letters. "Then borrow my bike."

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