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CONDESCEND...

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 overridding 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?
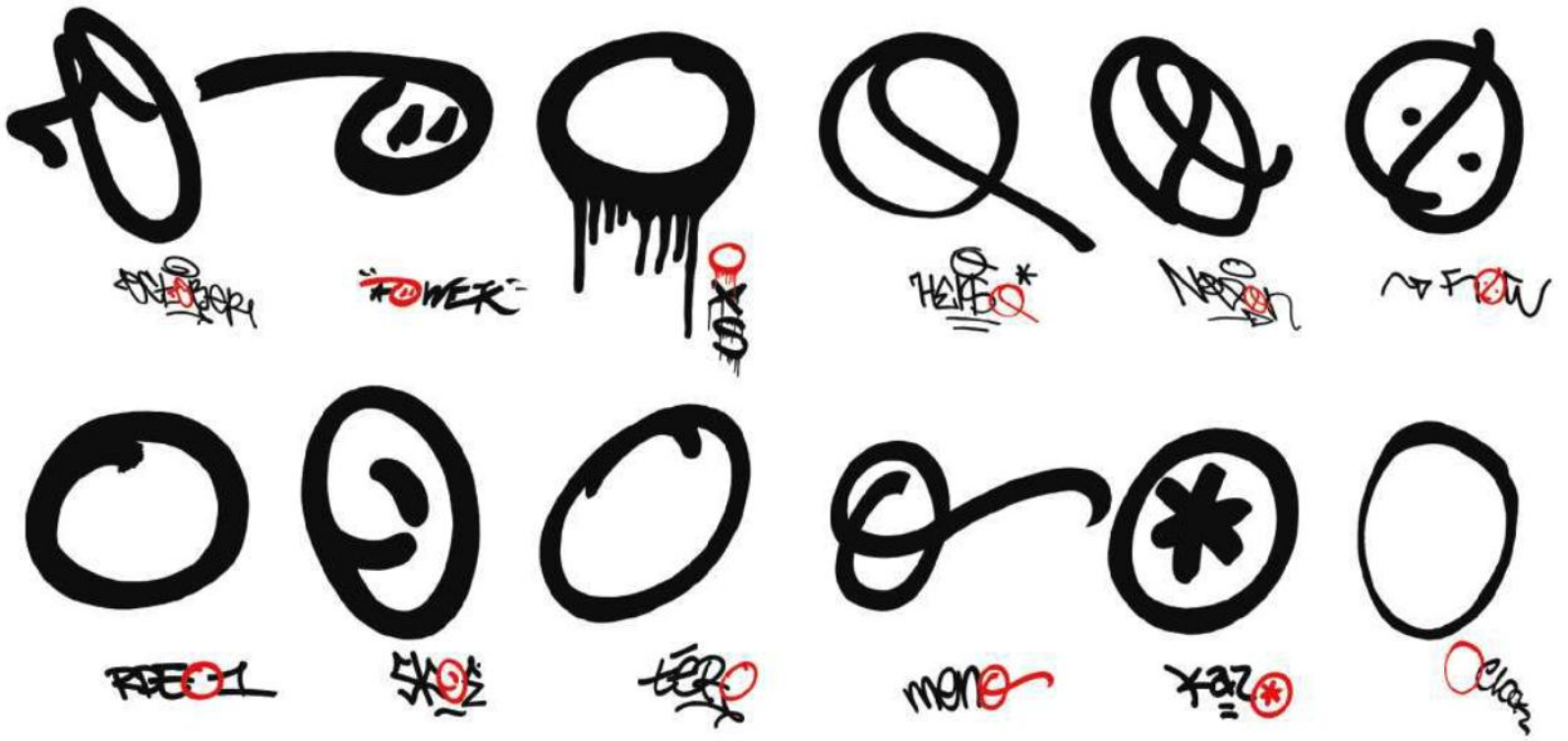
Evan Roth: There are differences, obviously, but to me the main similarity, in sort of a general sense, is that computer hackers take a digital system and perform some small alteration to change the general intent of that system. For example, studying someone's website and understanding the structure 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
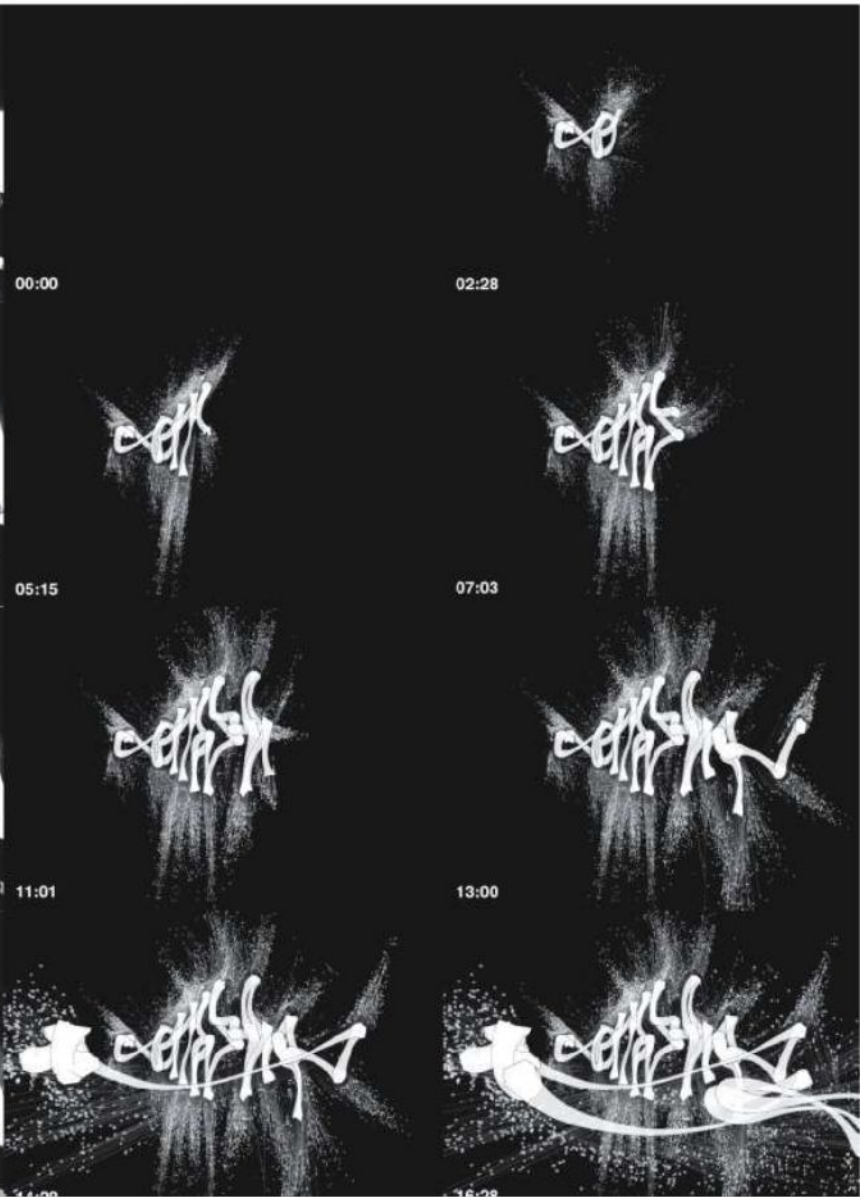
TRYING TO GET RAPPERS TALKING ABOUT SOURCE CODE INSTEAD OF TALKING ABOUT HOW MANY INCHES THEIR RIMS ARE. THAT'S THE ULTIMATE GOAL.

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 it the engine that built it the open source?

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

a dude who is paralyzed who wants to write graffiti with his eyes and someone who wants to take that data and draws it on the wall with a robot. And sitting in the middle of that is this little tiny text file.

Maybe your process isn't sexy, but the output is?

Yes.

I've heard Saber talk about how the style of writing reflects the environment you're in. So if you're in Tokyo, where there are super strict laws and everyone's watching you, maybe you're very tight and you're kind of covering with your shoulders, where an artist living somewhere that's more laid back is putting up a larger piece or a mural. I guess you can't analyze things like that until you capture the data in the wild?

Graffiti is all about location, right? It's all about more than just the tag, like a narrative of where it is, and when it is, and how high up it is, and how far away the police station is, and all these things that tie in to why that tag is interesting.

The next step for me is with this Graffitimarkuplanguage.com and this initiative on these websites that is taking all that interest and trying to figure out how to turn it into something that isn't just fancy cool graphic playback in a browser. I want to tie it back into the streets, into what's going on with the graffiti community, and really make this about that handshake moment. I want to get more graffiti writers into it. They're totally into the idea, but right now I have to meet with them, or I have to go out with them and walk them through the process. The idea is to come up with something they can do themselves and totally embrace.

I'll write up like a very detailed spec, and it's going to be for a graffiti field recording device, so the spec is basically going to say "it has to attach to any marker, or a spray paint can, and

it passively records graffiti bombing." A graffiti writer could make this for 100 euros or less, put it on whatever device they're using, and go out across the city. When they come back and pop out the SD card it has graffiti markup language tags for each tag they put up, geo-located, the whole deal.

I tweaked out when I looked at your site because half this stuff I'd seen independently, not in the context of your site. And I'm thinking, that was that guy too? You do something different every time, but looking at your whole body of work, that's when you can identify the common thread.

Well, I have this branding problem. My wife, she's managing me right now and she's trying to work on this, it's like everyone knows the projects and no one knows the name.

It's true. I hate to say that but it's true.

I think the hard things to get across are that they look so different. Inbox victory looks like a completely different project than LED throwies but if my practice is, I'm an artist experimenting with viral media it makes complete sense, you know?

You get punished for not doing the same drawing over and over again or the same character over and over again. I guess graffiti guys are the masters of branding in a way.

That's a totally serious issue that I think a lot of artists in this new media field are dealing with right now, not just a branding thing. In the traditional contemporary art world, as an artist you're rewarded for finding one thing and doing that for your whole career and by making it limited and not sharing, as well as having certain editions and signatures while playing up the genius of the singular artist as opposed to a group of weird hackers are working together. Everything that's happening in the scene that I'm so interested in is totally antithetical to the system that has traditionally supported artists.

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This system of people that are collecting art and buying it in galleries that show it, I think is of interest, but it's hard to make a living on this stuff using that model.

Your creativity isn't a commodity because you're just giving it away. Why would I want to own this thing? Anyone can have one.

Beyond that it's like the band that doesn't want to play their hit single for 30 years. That's what the art world wants, but I think a lot of the creative pockets that have been popping up within the digital scene and hacker scene aren't really that. The Web moves too fast for that. I'm sick of LED throwies, I'm sick of Laser Tag; I want to keep banging out all these new projects. Probably if my manager is over there, she knows the best thing to do would to be to find one of those and just hammer at it for a bunch of years and create some sort of visually appealing product that someone could hang on a wall. And yeah, then I would really be wearing better jeans if I did that.

For more information on Evan Roth, type "Bad Ass Motherfucker" into Google and click I'm Feeling Lucky.