ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: EVAN ROTH, FROM MICHIGAN TO NEW YORK TO FRANCE BACK

TO MICHIGAN [FOR DLECTRICITY]

The Legacy Lives On – courtesy of the artist, Evan Roth The Legacy Lives On – courtesy of the artist, Evan Roth

Light is magic: it disperses shadows, and it can transfix people. It is a proper symbol for hope and new beginnings. The evening of October 5th (from 7 p.m. to 12 a.m.) and the evening of October 6 (from 7 p.m. to 2 a.m.) Detroit hosts a new contemporary light art festival, DLECTRICITY. There are over 35 projects ranging from interactive light design to 3D video-mapping.

The Kunsthalle Detroit Museum of Multimedia and Light-Based Art concurrently opens its Luminale Detroit Light Festival, bringing together 24 international multimedia artists. Kunsthalle's light festival runs through December 5th. Through this embrace of light, Detroit is an arts beacon, on par with other cities across the world that have light festivals.

Evan Roth is one of the artists participating in DLECTRICITY. Evan is the essence of creativity, he excels at finding a worthy marriage between technology and fine art. He has received praise for his use of technology and a street art aesthetic; for DLECTRICITY Evan combines his love of hip hop, Detroit, and innovative fine art to pay tribute to J Dilla. His piece, "A Legacy Lives On," will show on the facade of the Museum of African American History, beginning October 5 at 7 p.m. Evan is from Michigan, but his art practice took him to New York to Hong Kong and eventually to Paris—where he now lives. He has work in NYC Museum of Modern Art permanent collection, and he was recently awarded the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award.

Colin Darke sits down with Evan to talk about DLECTRICITY and his art career.

#### Colin Darke: What is your background?

Evan: I grew up skateboarding and listening to rap music in rural mid-Michigan [Okemos to be exact]. I received my undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland in Architecture. After working in architecture for two years in Washington DC and another year in Los Angeles I moved to New York City to pursue an MFA in design and technology at Parsons [New School University]. Since graduating I've been doing art full time, spending two years as a fellow at Eyebeam, two years living in Hong Kong and now living for the last two years in Paris.

#### What or who inspires you?

I'm inspired by people that are able to make small alterations to larger systems. Alterations that repurpose the originally intended use and turn it into something new and unexpected. Often times these people self-identify as "hackers", but I also find these characteristics in graffiti writers, street artists, net artists, skateboarders and rappers.

#### Can you describe your piece for DLECTRICITY?

The piece I'm creating for DLECTRICITY is primarily a memorial to legendary hip-hop producer and former Detroit native James Dewitt Yancey (more commonly known as J. Dilla) who passed away in 2006. His work has had a big influence on me, and I think anyone that loves rap music. The title, "A Legacy Lives On", comes from a quotation found on his grave marker. The piece is a tribute both to him and the kind of music that he made, which was based on sampling and re-use. For two nights I will be projecting a large countdown timer on the facade of the Museum of African American History, that will count down from 70 years after his death, until the point when his music is free of copyright and enters the public domain. This temporary installation at DLECTRICITY is hopefully the first step in finding a home for a permanent version of the memorial somewhere in Detroit.

#### Is this in line with your other work?

I am very interested in copyright, free culture, free software and hip-hop, so in that sense it is very much in line with themes that I have been addressing in my work for several years. In terms of projection, however, it's somewhat of a shift. I no longer do some of the more performative projection based pieces that I have done in the past [such as Laser Tag and Graffiti Analysis].

#### What is your process?

I have an email account where I email myself ideas for art pieces when inspiration hits. From time to time I go through that account and if I'm still excited about a piece six months later I tend to make it. I maintain a studio in Montreuil [just east of Paris], and work together with my wife who handles much of the non-art-making related tasks.

### How has your art career changed over the past five years?

The core influences and values are the same, but I hope that my work has evolved over the years. I think that it has. I'm increasingly more interested in the relationship society and individuals have with technology, and less interested in the technology itself. I've been focused on dealing with the function of art in culture, and intentionally exploring that space in a more concentrated way. I'm also allowing myself more room to work on solo projects. My natural instinct is to crew up on projects immediately, and I sometimes forget that there are benefits to working alone as well.

## How did you end up in Paris? Can you compare your opportunities in Paris to those in Detroit?

The short version of why I ended up in Paris is that I was looking for a centrally located hub in Europe for my art practice. I was previously living in New York and Hong Kong and finding myself on more long flights to Europe than I was comfortable with. Moving to Paris was an effort to maximize my time in the studio making art, and minimizing my time flying from point to point. In many ways Paris is the exact opposite of Detroit. In Paris you have high rents, a beautiful and functioning infrastructure [including health care], people accustomed to a high quality of life, it's safe, and has an art scene that is at times aloof and exclusionary. Detroit, on the other hand, has low rent, a crumbling infrastructure, it's dangerous and has an art scene that is very united and community based. These are of course gross oversimplifications of two very complicated cities, but the differences are severe. I really love both cities, but for very different reasons.

## How often do you get back to Michigan?

Normally I get back at least once a year to see family. In April of this year I was invited to Eastern Michigan University for a solo exhibition and to teach a course, and that was the first time I've ever been in Michigan professionally. It's a great feeling coming home to make art, and this was a theme that ran through my Welcome To Detroit exhibition. I hope that this is the start of a long lasting relationship with the city and I will be able to come back on a regular and more frequent basis.

## What do you look for when viewing new artwork?

totally new way. I remember having this feeling when I first started skateboarding when I was younger. Skateboarding allows you to see the city in a completely new way. Stairs, handrails, curbs, ledges; things that would have normally gone unnoticed take on entirely new purposes. Good art can have this same effect on people. When I find myself thinking, "wow, I will never look at \_\_\_\_ the same again", or "Fuck, I should have thought of that!", it is usually a sign that I've stumbled into something exciting.

When I'm viewing and making art I'm looking for work that allows me to see something common in a

## Do you have any mentors?

Jonah Peretti [founder of the Huffington Post, Buzzfeed and the Eyebeam OpenLab] remains a big influence in my thinking about the Internet, free culture and popular culture. Zach Lieberman has been an influential teacher and mentor, especially surrounding code and interactivity. Artistically I have learned a lot and been inspired by Cory Arcangel. I'm also mildly obsessed with Jay-Z.

## How do you define success?

Professionally I define success as the freedom to make the art I want to make when I want to make it. When I find myself getting stressed out with the ins and outs of existing as an artist I try to remind myself of this. Artistically I define success as work that communicates meaningful content to an audience that includes the arts, but extends further into popular culture and non-art circles.

## How can Detroit attract artists like you?

Email people. A lot of artists especially in France, are fascinated with what they've heard is going on in Detroit. Since space is in abundance, I wou think that there are lot of artists that would be happy to come for residencies that didn't include much more than a place to stay, and perhaps access to tools and space to make work. It sounds simple, but I would think that due to this curiosity a lot more people would say 'yes' to invitations to Detroit than many other cities. Artist fees and free airfare never hurt either.

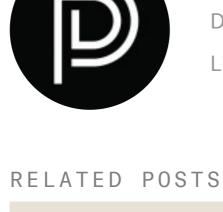
# What's next?

On Oct. 18th, I will be showing a new piece at 319 Scholes in NYC as part of Domenico Quaranta's exhibition, 'Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age'. I will be installing a 12' x 9' self portrait created from every image that passed through my Internet browser's cache directory during a personally traumatic two week period in July 2012. More info on that exhibition can be found here. Also, in November Lindsay Howard is curating 5 year retrospective of the F.A.T. Lab (a collective I co-founded in 2007) at Eyebeam in NYC. More info on that will be posted on http://fffff.at shortly.

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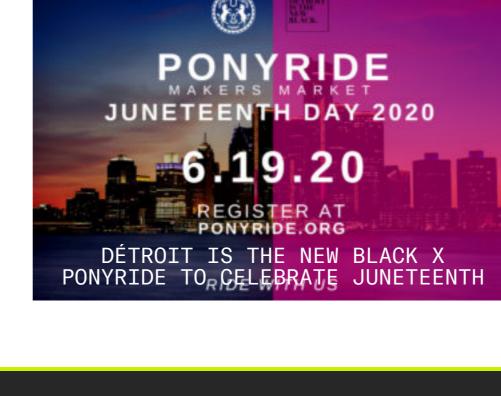
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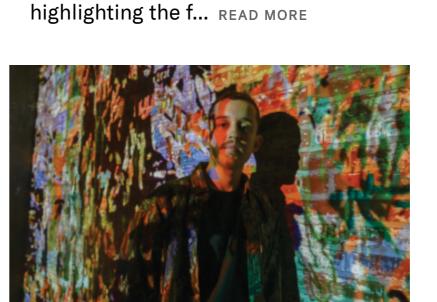
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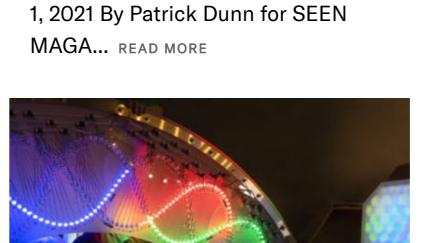
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