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Graffiti Research Lab: The Next-Generation of Street Art

They build tools of subversion and mass dissent. Like a giant graffiti laser. And throwable lights. It's street art gone high tech. And the start of a whole new movement. [▶](#)

By Tyler Cabot Nov 20, 2007

HOW TO START YOUR OWN GRAFFITI RESEARCH LAB



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THE GRAFFITI RESEARCH LAB

Graffiti Research Lab's goal is to get the tools of provocation and media subversion into as many hands as possible. To do this, founders James Powderly and Evan Roth have combined their backgrounds in robotics (Powderly once worked for a NASA contractor) and street art (Roth was valedictorian at Parsons the New School for Design in New York) to create the equivalent of virtual spray-paint cans.

They have a laser projector that they use to "tag" skyscrapers and other structures, like the Brooklyn Bridge (above). Point the laser pen at the wall and you can write in spray-paint letters thirty feet high. There are LED throwies -- little lights that when tossed at ferromagnetic walls or signs, stick like luminescent sprinkles -- and riot trikes, three-wheelers rigged with amplifiers that cause commotion and impromptu parades wherever they're ridden.

Once GRL builds a tool, they take it to the street to demonstrate. Then they put videos, pictures, and step-by-step directions for how to build it online -- everything is open source, meant to be shared by all, improved by all. GRL's only rule is that they not be used for commercial means -- not always an easy stance, since advertising and media companies seeking street cred are often first in line to co-opt their methods.

Since its founding in 2005 at the Eyebeam OpenLab in New York, GRL has morphed and grown. Today it is based out of Powderly and Roth's own Brooklyn-based F.A.T. Lab (which stands for Free Art & Technology), and other cells, which use and improve upon their tactics, have bubbled up all over the globe. Some build their own throwies and laser projectors; others just appropriate the GRL name and principles. But all have the same mission: to mar the smooth surface of things, voice a little dissent. And get as many people as possible to follow suit.

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