

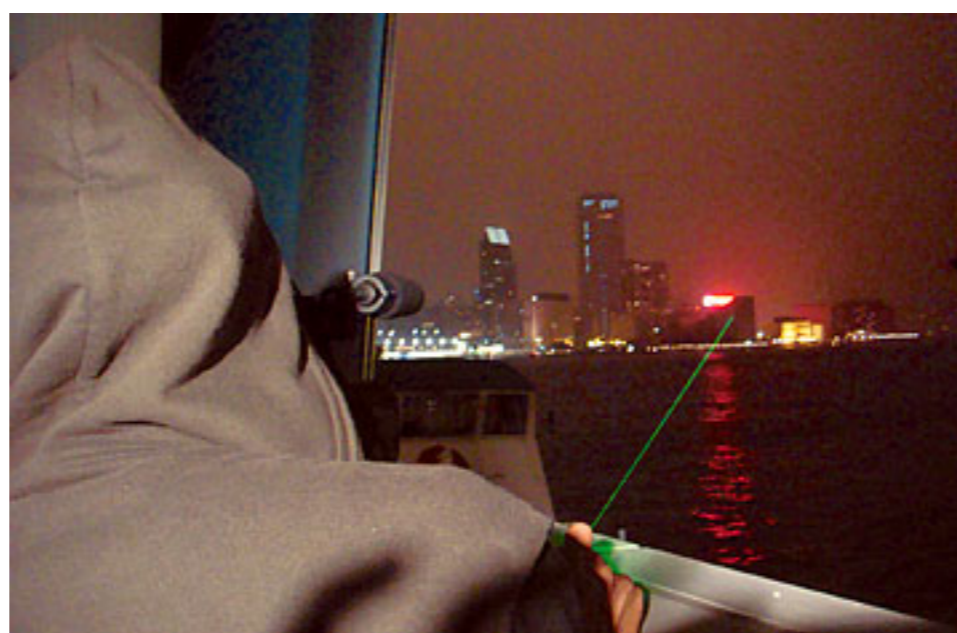
Writing on the Wall

By Adriane Quinlan | Thursday, Dec. 06, 2007

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The west wall of Hong Kong's City Hall is the kind of canvas graffiti artists long for. Unsullied and several stories high, its white surface can be seen from some of the city's busiest roads. It has never been "tagged" — to use graffiti parlance — but that doesn't deter local artist MC Yan, who is famous for having left his work on, of all places, the Great Wall.



Syan a.k.a. MC Yan

MC Yan uses a laser pointer to tag Hong Kong's Cultural Centre across Victoria Harbour

On a breezy November night, Yan etches Chinese characters across most of the side of City Hall. They read "Save Queen's Pier" (an ironic appeal on behalf of a now demolished landmark), and the reason he can write them with impunity is because they are drawn using a laser pointer in high-intensity light — not spray paint. By standing on the roof of a parking lot across the street, he also avoids any danger of trespassing. When he's done, Yan erases the words by clicking a button on the laser pointer, connected to a laptop and projector at his feet. He then moves on to tag other prominent buildings, including the city's Cultural Centre.

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The system used by MC Yan is known as L.A.S.E.R. Tag and is a creation of the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL), a New York City art group founded in 2005 to outfit the world's street artists with innovative, open-source technology. Given that L.A.S.E.R. Tag can be operated from hundreds of feet away, the opportunities for subversion are tantalizing. A message can be written on the face of a major public building and the perpetrators long gone before the authorities pinpoint where the laser came from. In a more everyday context, L.A.S.E.R. Tag's ability to allow artists to get their messages across without any permanent defacement of buildings may well increase public support for the art form. And ultimately, it is graffiti for a tech-savvy generation. "Kids these days are born with a computer strapped to their fingers," says GRL co-founder James Powderly, who formerly worked in space robotics but has always been obsessed with graffiti. "We see ourselves as Q, from James Bond, but we don't want just to show this new stuff, we want to implant it."

Along with co-founder Evan Roth, Powderly taught classes at New York's Parsons School of Design and over the past year they have showcased the laser technology in Mexico City, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Vienna. Last month they showed up at a Taipei conference on new media and left behind equipment as a gift for a local graffiti group. Next summer, Powderly and Roth will travel to Beijing,

In fact, the technology has already been demonstrated in the Chinese capital. New York-based Paul Notzold recently traveled to Beijing where he used L.A.S.E.R. Tag to create a kind of performance art, encouraging pedestrians to send text messages to a central phone hooked up to his laptop. The text messages were then projected onto the Millennium Art Museum. "I was tentative about putting up unsanctioned messages on buildings, because of the government," Notzold says. "There were your typical radio shout-outs, and there were also some statements that could be kind of activist protest statements." The event took place without incident.

Traditional graffiti is in no danger of being outmoded anytime soon, however. While L.A.S.E.R. Tag technology is getting cheaper, it's not cheap. The complete setup costs \$8,000 — that's \$7,993 more than a can of spray paint from a typical U.S. hardware chain. Jay FC, one of the founders of the Hong Kong-based graffiti collective ST/ART, maintains that the cost is contrary to the spirit of street art. "It's supposed to just be something that anyone can pick up and do," he says.

For now, Roth and Powderly must be content with loaning and donating L.A.S.E.R. Tag equipment, and they are finding a particularly enthusiastic reception in Asia. "Technology has a very different meaning in China, in Korea," says Marc Schiller of popular street-art website *Wooster Collective*. Schiller sees L.A.S.E.R. Tag as standing in the tradition of such pioneering new-media artists as the late Korean-born Nam June Paik. "[In Asia] it's not thought of as incompatible or separate from art," he says.

U.S. media lecturer Alice Arnold argues that if lighting-based expression has a real source, it's Hong Kong, because the city "has always been at the forefront of light signage." But there's just one snag: light pollution. Compared to Hong Kong's extravagantly lit skyscrapers, MC Yan's tags don't stand out as intensely as they should, no matter how big they are. "In New York we can be the brightest thing in town," says Powderly. "In Hong Kong, we've never felt like we were losing so badly." Perhaps his next project should be a system that works in daylight instead.

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