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"HACKTIVIST" EVAN ROTH RETURNS TO MICHIGAN

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"When you are a skateboarder, you see the world in a different way. Every set of stairs or railing becomes a new challenge to master." This personal point of view has propelled Evan Roth from his beginnings in 1996 as a teenaged skateboarder with a passion for rap music to being Michigan's own international phenomenon in the art world. Roth is from an affluent community in Okemos, Michigan, close to East Lansing. "I got mostly decent grades, but I really wanted to be a professional skateboarder and rapper. It didn't take me long to realize that I wasn't going to make a living that way. So my plan was to go into architecture, where I might have a shot at designing buildings with public spaces that would be friendly to skateboarders," shared Roth.

Roth received an undergraduate degree in architecture and soon was living in Washington, DC working in his chosen profession. He talked about his growing dissatisfaction with his architectural work where good design and ideas were routinely set aside for budget reasons. "Every night and on the weekends I was spending more and more time online, experiencing the freedom of making things online without consideration for budget," said Roth about his emerging interest in art. "My whole life changed when I discovered the U.K. artist Banksy who was making art and creating moments of disruption through public art. When I saw the piece he did where he painted crosswalk lines over a parked car, I was hooked. Three months later I quit my job and enrolled in graduate school for new media art at Parsons New School of Design in New York City."

Early influences of rap and skateboard culture drew Evan Roth to explore the public displays of graffiti artists, expand on his online experiences and the art of the "hack" defined by the Urban Dictionary *as a clever or elegant technical accomplish*

ment, especially one with a playful or prankish bent. Roth's unique point of view and sense of humor is reflected in his art, like the TSA *Nothing to See Here* campaign where he pokes fun at the rigidity of the safety regulations and protocols of the TSA. Or, seeing the irony found in the ubiquitous airborne catalog – Sky Mall where his art form was created with images torn from the catalog, becoming fleeting pieces of work presented on his drop-down tray in-flight and captured for publication online with a camera.

It was Roth's interest in the practice of open source, open data and crowd-sourcing that has led to some of his most widely embraced projects like his "laser tagging" events to create large scale "laser graffiti" on buildings. In the online world, software code is either proprietary/closed or open source. The open source approach fosters rich collaboration

and continuous improvement, which this artist has extended to creating works of art online with an open-sourced philosophy. In 2007 Roth and a friend, Ben Engebreth, created the White Glove Tracking project which challenged anonymous online collaborators to help isolate Michael Jackson's famous rhinestone encrusted single white glove from his nationally-televised landmark performance of *Billy Jean*. Collaborators have created several videos, easily found online, for *White Glove Tracking* created with the assembled open data.

The open source process can be very empowering. For example, the Eyewriter project created by Roth and four other non-professional developers created an inspiring solution for graffiti artist, Tempt1, who is paralyzed by the advancement of ALS, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The Eyewriter team created the ultimate hack by fashioning a device that Tempt1 could control with only his eyes – enabling him to communicate and "eye-write" in his own graffiti style.

Similar to the open source approach to the Eyewriter project, an online language called *graffiti markup language,* known as GML, was created as a universal open file format designed to store graffiti motion data. GML has taken on a life of its own and has been embraced by Golan Levin, the director of the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University. He and his team, in addition to some earth-bound GML initiatives, are exploring the idea of sending a robot, programmed with GML, to the moon. The theory is that the tracks made by the robot will, in essence, put a graffiti tag on the moon. "The cool thing about GML is that the barrier for entry into the language is very low – 'weekend programmers' will have no problem getting into it and understanding it…and that will give it so much more community investment," claimed Roth.

Evan Roth and his wife, Michele Walther, have lived in several parts of the world — Hong Kong, Los Angeles, New York, and now Paris, where Roth has earned widespread recognition for his art. Roth is currently staying in Detroit while completing a fellowship at Eastern Michigan University, part of the McAndless Distinguished Professorship award for 2012, and conducting some new hacks using spray paint as propulsion tools rather than pigment tools. In addition to his gallery show, called *Welcome to Detroit*, (the name of the show is a nod to an early influence by hip-hop artist J Dilla – who passed away in 2006). Blogging about Detroit, Roth writes:

" …there are a bunch of people who have been there for years doing art and they still have a long way to go, but the arts community in Detroit – as opposed to say, New York – is so united."

The show, *Welcome to Detroit*, at the EMU University Gallery is open to the public until 4/2; Roth is also conducting a 6-week intensive course for EMU art students and offering several lectures open to the public. "The popularity of the Evan Roth class demonstrates the students' interest in his timely and unique inter-disciplinary approach to his art," said Colin Blakely, head of the EMU Art Department.

Currently Evan Roth is exploring an "internet cache" approach to a biography. The internet cache creates a visual biography or self-portrait of an individual's time spent online, chronicling all the web locations visited. Roth wonders what meaning the self-portraits will have over an extended period of time, say 10 to 20 years – how will technology change, how will a person's own interests evolve and be represented over time? Visitors to the Eastern Michigan University Gallery at the Student Center will be able to view Roth's own *Internet Cache Self-Portrait* and many other examples of his art, which "see the world in a different way."

When his time at Eastern Michigan concludes in April, Evan rejoins his wife Michele at their home in Paris for a few days and then he is off to Barcelona to prepare for another gallery show at N2 Gallery.