

Evan Roth, an Award-Winning Man of Many Tags



Owen Franken for The New York Times

Evan Roth, at rest in Paris, has won a Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award.

By STEVEN KURUTZ

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In street-culture circles, Evan Roth is already a boldface name, with a résumé that includes collaborating with Jay-Z on a music video and creating a computerized analysis of graffiti motion.

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He also helped found the Graffiti Research Lab, an artist group that has undertaken projects like tagging the Brooklyn Bridge with an (erasable) laser and tossing projectile LEDs onto city buildings.

Mr. Roth, 34, is being honored this year by the design community as a winner of a Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award.

John C Jay, global executive creative director and partner at Wieden + Kennedy and the jury chairman for the awards, said Mr. Roth was chosen in the interaction design category, in part, because “he blurs the distinctions between technology, design and art.”

He cited as an example the EyeWriter. The device, which Mr. Roth helped design, allowed a paralyzed graffiti artist named Tempt1 to draw with his eyes. “He’s definitely a very strong problem solver,” Mr. Jay said of Mr. Roth. “That’s at the heart of the design.”

Mr. Roth, who has an M.F.A. from Parsons The New School for Design and lived in New York for several years, spoke about his work on the phone from his home in Paris.

Do you think of yourself as a designer?

I consider myself an artist, but I do see the connection to design. I think my work tends to address dual audiences. It has one life that happens within white cubes in art galleries. But I also have interest in reaching a completely separate online audience. I like when my work appears in galleries and on the front page of YouTube.

Has YouTube been important in getting your work seen, especially the videos you post of street art projects like

L.A.S.E.R. Tag?

It’s not about YouTube; it’s about the Internet. I hadn’t seen a Banksy piece out in the street until 10 years after I was introduced to his work. But seeing one piece on the Web was enough to make me quit my job and go back to graduate school.

I understand when people have specific ideas about how certain parts of art shouldn’t be mediated. That it’s meant to be experienced out in the street. But the influence we can have on society as artists now vastly outweighs those arguments.

Much of your work involves subverting technology and the Internet. Do you know how to write code?

Yes, I know how to write code. But I find it taxing and boring. I’m not fun to be around when I’m writing code.

My relationship with technology is more a fascination with the people writing code. The hacker communities. I’m not talking about phone scandals and e-mail hacking. When I look at graffiti artists, I see hackers. I see a community of people who are making their own tools and subverting systems to tell stories.

How did the Jay-Z “Brooklyn Go Hard” video happen?

I got a call from a former classmate who’s now working at a firm. He remembered this project I did in graduate school at Parsons. He said, “Can you make a Jay-Z video in three days?” Hell, yes. I canceled Thanksgiving that year. My wife was like, “I understand. Do what you have to do. I’ll handle the food.”

Are you interested in doing more traditional products, like designing furniture?

I wouldn’t be against that. I came from architecture and worked in it for three years before I started dabbling on the Web. But not having money influence design decisions was liberating to me. It got disappointing to see great design ideas be shelved because the materials were considered too expensive. I don’t know if I can go back.

The other winners of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Awards are Richard Saul Wurman (lifetime achievement), Janine Benyus (design mind), Design That Matters (corporate and institutional achievement), Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects (architecture design), Rebeca Méndez (communication design), Thom Browne (fashion design), Clive Wilkinson Architects (interior design), Stoss Landscape Urbanism (landscape architecture), Scott Wilson (product design).

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