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Graffiti Research Lab: Bridging the Canonical and the Criminal

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Abstract of the Thesis

Graffiti Research Lab: Bridging the Canonical and the Criminal

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Evan Roth and James Powderly created the Graffiti Research Lab, or GRL, in New York City in 2005. Both men, whose backgrounds are not in art-making at all, joined forces with two specific goals in mind: to create tools for traditional graffitists— tools that would lead to new graffiti forms and methods—and to initiate the reconsideration of graffiti amongst urban populations. Graffiti—which began appearing in its modern-day form in major cities across the United States in the late 1960s—was, and still is, viewed as vandalism by the public and the art world and disregarded as an art form. From the outset, GRL's mission was to combat the many negative opinions and misinterpretations of graffiti. GRL did so by perpetuating graffiti's proliferation— assisting graffitists in "getting up" and avoiding arrest—and by developing alternative forms of graffiti that encouraged greater public participation and understanding. Inadvertently, in the process of creating tools for graffiti artists, GRL's designs evolved into works of art in their own right and the members of GRL transitioned from "graffiti engineers" to artists.

The work of the Graffiti Research Lab avoided inheritance of the public's negative reception of graffiti by fostering aesthetic and thematic associations, whether intentionally or unintentionally, between GRL pieces and canonical public artworks. It was these connections between GRL and these other, more accepted art genres—like performance art, light art and projection art—that also caused a reevaluation of traditional graffiti. This reassessment finally allowed for the artworks of graffitists, and of GRL, to be incorporated into major art institutions without compromise to their visual or contextual values. Graffiti's essential qualities or themes, which GRL later adapted for its works, were motion, interactivity, ephemerality, and reclamation of urban environments. Since GRL's work retained these qualities as they exhibited in esteemed art spaces, graffiti proper was finally able to be situated within the art world as well. GRL made slight modifications to graffiti, but triggered monumental shifts in its valuation by creating a dialogue between the artistic qualities of graffiti and the characteristics of numerous canonical art forms.

To my Rock Dove

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<u>Introduction</u>

In February 2008, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City opened an exhibition entitled "Design and the Elastic Mind." With the museum's world-renowned permanent collection and countless popular exhibitions, this exhibition could easily be considered just one of many successful events in the Museum of Modern Art's illustrious history. However, "Design and the Elastic Mind" marked a significant moment in the history of art. For the first time, a major museum showcased the work of a group of graffiti artists in a way that did not compromise the aesthetics or social and political significance of graffiti. The group was Graffiti Research Lab and the work was their most recognized piece to date: *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*. The Graffiti Research Lab tagged the walls of the Museum of Modern Art—boldly asserting graffiti's rightful place in the institutions and discourse of the contemporary art world. How did they accomplish such a feat, a feat unsurpassed by their traditional graffiti predecessors? The members of Graffiti Research Lab effectively tagged themselves into art's canon by retaining the aesthetics, authenticity and motivations of graffitists while modernizing and creating works that had both visual and thematic similarities to other, more popular contemporary art forms.

The Graffiti Research Lab (hereafter referred to as GRL) began in New York City in 2005, Evan Roth and James Powderly. At that time, both men were fellows at Eyebeam Gallery, a nonprofit arts and technology center. Both men, whose backgrounds are not in art-making at all, were very interested in graffiti and street art. They decided to join forces with the purpose of creating projects that "rethink how people make and look at graffiti and street art, not by making the stuff but by developing tools that graffiti

writers could potentially use."[1] Graffiti, in its traditional form, began appearing in major

cities across the United States in the late 1960s. Graffiti was, and still is, habitually

viewed as vandalism by the public and the art world and disregarded as a possible art

form. From the outset, GRL's mission was to combat the many negative opinions and

misinterpretations of graffiti. GRL did so by perpetuating graffiti's proliferation—

assisting graffitists in "getting up" and avoiding arrest—and by developing alternative

forms of graffiti that encouraged greater public participation and understanding.

Inadvertently, in the process of creating tools for graffiti artists, GRL's designs evolved

into works of art in their own right and the members of GRL transitioned from "graffiti

engineers" to artists.[2]

The support from and collaboration with traditional graffitists was of extreme

importance to GRL's work. However, it was the public's positive reception and the art

world's favorable reviews of the works that prompted GRL's shift from a group of mere

vandals to a collective of contemporary artists. GRL incorporated themes and visual

elements of other forms of art—namely, performance art, laser/light art and projection

art—into their pieces as they simultaneously retained the aesthetic and contextual values

of graffiti. It was this successful balance between the criminal and the canonical, graffiti

and high art, that caused widespread interest and appreciation of the works of the GRL.

Their blatant ties to graffiti practice and culture also sparked the necessary reexamination

of graffiti in general. Traditional graffiti has always had aesthetic merit and artistic

themes, which have often been disregarded or downplayed in an effort to emphasize the

unfavorable and, most importantly, non-artistic aspects of graffiti. The artists of GRL

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[1] Geeta Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2006, Arts section.
[2] Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists."

finally brought into focus the artistry of graffiti that has always existed through their works' creative use of and similarities to less anarchistic types of art. The works of GRL created a bridge between traditional graffiti and high art without forsaking either one. Because of that, GRL occupies a unique place in both the history of graffiti *and* the history of art.

This study will begin with a more thorough look at GRL's beginnings in 2005 and the collective's growth since then. The group's kinship with traditional graffiti will become more and more apparent, as will the public's contradictory views towards traditional graffiti versus the graffiti-based works of GRL. A comparison of the common negative perception of graffiti and GRL's positive reception by society and the art world will highlight the group's success at transcending biases and creating works that are both enjoyed by the public and recognized as artworks by art professionals. GRL's combination of graffiti tradition and various contemporary art practices is responsible for their success, but just *how* did they bridge these very different art forms? Similar themes—such as movement, interactivity, ephemerality and reclamation of urban space—pervade works by traditional graffitists, GRL, and canonical artists in non-graffiti art forms. The majority of this study, however, will focus on discussing the presence of these themes in three of GRL's works/projects—*LED Throwies*, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*, and *Light Criticism*.

LED Throwies, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*, and *Light Criticism* all incorporate the themes of motion, interactivity, ephemerality and environment reclamation—themes that are central to traditional graffiti and to various modern art forms. For the sake of simplicity, each of these three works will be examined separately despite frequently sharing thematic and

aesthetic qualities. Each work will be described in detail and then analyzed through the lens of one or two themes that the work shares with its traditional graffiti predecessors and its art world contemporaries. GRL's *LED Throwies*, one of the group's first works, dealt directly with themes of motion and interactivity. Motion and interactivity were also fundamental themes of graffiti and of the performance art movement, especially the performance pieces of Allan Kaprow. A second work by GRL, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*, will be considered in relation to the theme of ephemerality, a theme shared with traditional graffiti and artworks consisting solely of lasers or light, such as the works of artist Rockne Krebs. Lastly, GRL's *Light Criticism* will be juxtaposed, using the shared theme of reclaiming urban environments, to both graffiti and the projection-based works of Jenny Holzer. The works of GRL undoubtedly share aesthetic similarities to both graffiti and the aforesaid art forms, but it is their thematic and contextual parallels that position GRL within both traditions and within a unique tradition of its own.

I. Graffiti Research Lab

In 2005, James Powderly (1976-), whose field was aerospace robotics, and Evan Roth (1978-), a professional Web designer and coder, drastically changed their areas of expertise. These two men transformed themselves from traditional technophiles into graffiti engineers. Both men cited their first viewing of the 1983 documentary *Style Wars* as the turning point in their careers. *Style Wars* examined graffiti and hip-hop culture and "immortalized the 1980s face-off between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and

graffiti writers."[3] Evan Roth discussed the film and how greatly it affected him and Powderly in a *New York Times* article on GRL: "They were hacking the subway to transport these huge art pieces from borough to borough. That movie makes graffiti feel like such a movement."[4] Wanting to be a part of that ongoing movement, they utilized their specialized backgrounds and began creating technologies that could assist graffiti writers in various ways. GRL was established with the mission of outfitting graffitists, activists and other street artists with "open source tools for urban communication."[5]

Fig. 1 GRL's makeshift coat of arms showing the group's ties to traditional spray-paint graffiti, but also its strong emphasis on technology. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/watz/2167545585 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

The GRL has grown exponentially since Powderly and Roth's meager beginnings as fellows at the Eyebeam Gallery in 2005. GRL's directive to produce "open source"

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[3] Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists."
[4] Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists."
[5] Graffiti Research Lab, http://graffitiresearchlab.com.

works is largely responsible for their growth and success. "Open source" technology is just as the name implies—technology, whose source material is open to the public. In the Lab's case, it refers to the freely given and widely available coding, instructions and materials necessary for each of the group's works. GRL has produced around twenty projects between 2005 and present-day—all designed to assist graffiti writers, but all easily replicable by any layperson who visits the group's website. Since 2005, Powderly and Roth have moved the original GRL from the Eyebeam Gallery to the Free Art and Technology Lab (F.A.T. Lab, which they co-founded). GRL's emphasis on open source technology has allowed for many coteries of GRL to pop up all over the world. There are now more than a dozen other GRL groups working in cities such as Amsterdam, Paris, San Paolo, and Los Angeles. Each faction upholds the mission that Powderly and Roth established, despite consisting of persons that typically have no graffiti background and/or have never met GRL's founders. More importantly, the existence of these GRL subdivisions all over the world demonstrates the universal appeal of the group and their work.

The technological backgrounds of Roth and Powderly unquestionably influenced the types of projects and tools the GRL would go on to design. James Powderly addressed the role of technology in their work in a GRL film entitled "GRL: The Complete First Season":

> When we were thinking about what's graffiti's relationship
> with technology we were also thinking isn't necessarily
> mean high-technology. I mean we've come to think of the
> spray can as probably the best technology that's ever
> happened to graffiti. But we were interested in thinking of
> technology also in the sense of the hacker mentality and
> how hackers treat software sort of the same way that
> graffiti writers and street artists treat the city. They look for

these systems, they identify them, and then they flip them a little bit to tell something that the city didn't intend to tell.[6]

Powderly and Roth saw technology as a means to an end: a way to carry on traditional graffiti's subversive behavior. However, they also saw technology as a tool that could be used to alter the common negative perceptions of graffiti. The technologies that GRL went on to create were "intentionally designed to be cheap, user-friendly and not illegal." GRL's recreation of graffiti, through various devices that were considerably low-tech, demonstrated the group's awareness of the tradition they work within and the public's perception of that tradition.

In the 2006 *New York Times* article that first sparked interest in GRL's work, for example, Evan Roth stated: "'The kind of stuff I've been doing is intentionally geared to a wider audience…One of the goals with the GRL is to try to remove some of the negative connotations that graffiti has.'"[7] Roth and Powderly recognized graffiti's frequent "negative connotations" and their works were designed specifically to combat those connotations. Creating tools for urban communication was their main priority, but altering public and art world perceptions of graffiti ran a close second. The group's concern regarding the reception of its work, and reception of graffiti in general, was indicative of just how unfavorably graffiti was viewed. Unlike the majority of newspaper articles on graffiti and graffiti artists in the past, GRL was featured and interviewed as innovative contemporary artists, not addressed as criminals or social deviants. The issue of how they accomplished this goal of greater public understanding and support of graffiti is the central focus of this study. However, to fully grasp the magnitude of their achievement, a brief examination of the tradition that GRL comes from is crucial.

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[6] Graffiti Research Lab, "GRL: The Complete First Season," http://vimeo.com/3177642.
[7] Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists."

Traditional Graffiti

Historians and sociologists vary on when modern graffiti actually began, but it is generally accepted that "graffiti became a public issue in the early 1970s when stylized names and street numbers began to proliferate in New York City (as well as Philadelphia)."[8] It is also generally accepted that graffiti's increased dissemination in the 1970s had a great deal to do with the adoption of spray paint as the medium of choice.[9] In 1970, *The New York Times* began reporting more frequently on the recurring appearance of graffiti and "almost all of the graffiti reports discovered from 1972 and half of those for 1971 were concerned with the newfound popularity of spray-painting among inner city youth."[10] Graffiti "writers" (as they are most commonly referred to) at this time were often urban youth, and the majority were young, non-white men.[11] Due to graffiti's placement in urban spaces and its common association with gang culture, sociologists, ethnographers, and geographers have examined graffiti a great deal.[12] However, graffiti

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[8] T. Cresswell, "The crucial 'where' of graffiti: a geographical analysis of reactions to graffiti in New York," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992), 331. Cher Krause Knight in her book *Public Art: Theory, Practice, and Populism* states that New York's graffiti movement can be traced back to 1970 exactly, with the widespread graffiti writing of artist Taki 183. Other historians and writers place it earlier than this, such as David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky, "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64 (1974): 491, who place the reappearance of graffiti in 1965 or even earlier. Graffiti appearing post-1960s will be referred to traditional graffiti or modern-day graffiti in this study due to its long history prior to the 1960s. Graffiti could be said to have begun, in its most primitive and basic form, in the prehistoric era when man began writing on cave walls. Essentially, graffiti is words or drawings that have been scratched, written, or painted onto a wall or surface. Originating from the Greek word "graphein", which means "to write", graffiti began being used more frequently as the plural of the Italian word "graffito", which means "scratched." The first historical use of the term "graffiti" dates back to the drawings and inscriptions found on the wall of the ancient Roman ruins (Pompeii being the most popular example). Even before Common Era, graffiti was utilized as means of expressing oneself or the sentiments of the population

[9] David Ley and Roman Cybriwky, in "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers," highlighted that in 1970, *The New York Times* began reporting more frequently on the recurring appearance of graffiti:"Almost all of the graffiti reports discovered from 1972 and half of those for 1971 were concerned with the newfound popularity of spray-painting among inner city youth."

[10] David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky, "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64 (1974), 491.

[11] Susan Stewart, "Ceci Tuera Cela: Graffiti as Crime and Art," in *Life after Postmodernism*, ed. John Fekete, (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1987), 164.

[12] For a more in-depth analysis of graffiti's ethnographic and geographic factors, consult Ley and Cybriwsky, "Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers" and Lachmann, "Graffiti as Career and Ideology," *The American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988).

has rarely been addressed as an art form or movement. The lack of art historical analysis of graffitists' work has not only left a void in the discourse surrounding graffiti, but it has also perpetuated the belief that graffiti is not art. Yet, graffiti has always had an aesthetic dimension.

The look of modern-day graffiti fluctuates depending on the style of the artist and placement of their work. All graffiti works have different social and political implications and varying degrees of complexity, which influence their appearance and its perception. The most basic form of graffiti is referred to as a "tag," which is named such for its quick application. In a 2007 study, Noelia Quintero describes tags as "carefully selected combinations of letters, icons and/or figures used by writers as their signature: identities converted into images through typography, design and drawing."[13] Despite their rapid creation, tags are not meaningless scribbles. Each tag represents a person who has chosen specific letters, numbers and symbols to represent their name, their background, their personal style and their desired aesthetic. Other forms of graffiti are murals, "throw-ups", or "pieces." Whereas tags are menacing because of their frequency, these other types of graffiti are even more menacing because of their scale and location.[14]

Unlike the work of GRL, standard urban graffiti—regardless of its variations, its aesthetics, or its contextual meaning—has never been able to shake off its negative associations. One recurring reason behind the public's animosity toward graffiti is that graffiti is vandalism, not art. It is illegal, and therefore unacceptable—and these

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[13] Noelia Quintero, "The Screen on the Street: Convergence and Agonic Coincidences between Graffiti and New Media Objects," *Artnodes* 7 (2007), http://www.artnodes.com/7/dt/eng/quintero.html.

[14] Throw-ups are hereby defined as any graffiti that includes anything more than a graffiti artist's basic tag. A mural, on the other hand, can be thought of as similar to traditional mural painting—graffiti that takes up an entire wall. Finally, "pieces" were, as a 1973 *New York Times* article describes, "a more 'irksome' form of graffiti…whole subway cars painted in graphic multicolor designs."

sentiments were apparent in periodicals and the government's reaction to graffiti.[15] Even

as recently as 2009, an article from *The New York Times* on the removal of graffiti

highlighted this controversy over whether or not graffiti is art. Dorothea Basile, the

director and founder of ARTime stated: "Not everybody feels that it is art…The idea of

preserving something that people don't feel that it's art is very challenging."[16] The

majority of people find it difficult to reconcile a form of vandalism as a form of art,

which is what makes GRL's public and critical success that much more notable.

Graffiti in Art World

GRL's recognition as an artist collective, not a group of criminals, is most

remarkable because GRL has not modified the one quality of graffiti that provoked the

most revulsion in more mundane circumstances: its placement. Public disdain for graffiti

is, without a doubt, an issue of site. It is an interjection into "public" space—and it is

done so without permission from the masses or from the "authorities." It is out of place

and because of that fact it is linked to other things reviled and out of place: filth, sickness,

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[15] Due to the scope of this study, the level and extent of public dislike of graffiti cannot be fully explored. Many of the examples that have been given have spoken of New York City specifically, but it is important to remember that graffiti was/is a worldwide urban epidemic. For example: In San Francisco, there has been a major governmental mission to remove graffiti with the Department of Public Works spending $3.7 million per year on its anti-graffiti program—sometimes at the expense of jobs and other public programs. More information regarding San Francisco's graffiti response can be found at S.F. Weekly.com: "Coverup worse than crime? S.F. outspends other cities fighting graffiti," by Peter Jamison, December 9, 2009. In this article, there is also information regarding the misplaced level of importance given to graffiti as a public issue: "Last month, the Board of Supervisors was desperately trying to scrounge up $8 million to prevent layoffs among public health workers. The Public Works graffiti-abatement program burns through that much in less than three years." The fact that individuals were losing their jobs because graffiti removal was a more pressing issue demonstrates the outrageous extent of the government's dislike and concern for graffiti.
[16] Sarah Maslin Nir, "Removal of Graffiti Along High Line Vexes Some," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2009, NY/Region section, City Room blog.

insanity, and obscenity.[17] However, there is a larger issue at hand and that is graffiti's

impact upon the field of art. As critic Susan Stewart put it: "the larger threat of graffiti is

its violation of the careful system of delineation by which the culture articulates the

proper spaces for artistic production and reproduction."[18] In an effort to assert the art

world's open-mindedness, and, most importantly, its control over graffiti, institutions of

art could no longer neglect the works of graffitists. Regardless of their personal, negative

feelings toward graffiti, art professionals (i.e. curators, historians, and critics) beginning

in the 1970s needed to find a place for graffiti in their institutions. Doing so would allow

the art world to manipulate the aesthetics of graffiti, place it in a "proper" setting, and

remove most of its political and social meaning.

Upon the inclusion of graffiti in galleries in museums, graffitists straddled two

worlds: one world of their own making and the other constructed around an idealized or

manufactured version of graffiti. The art world saw an opportunity in graffiti to reiterate

that it had institutions that were both open and current. Despite the fact that graffiti

violated many art institution principles (i.e. it was given freely, an artist did not need any

formal training, it occurred outside a prescribed art area), the art world admitted graffiti

into its venues. However, it did so according to its own rules. Graffiti was posited as a

social and cultural trend with minimal artistic merit, not as a valid and respectable art

movement:

> Graffiti on canvas, graffiti as art work or art object, clearly
> is the invention of the institutions of art—the university, the
> gallery, the critic, the collector. And it is an invention
> designed to satisfy the needs of those institutions to assert

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[17] Graffiti as a representation of the dirty, the sick, the insane and the obscene is a theory explored in both Cresswell's
"The crucial 'where' of graffiti: a geographical analysis of reactions to graffiti in New York" and Stewart's "Ceci
Tuera Cela: Graffiti as Crime and Art."
[18] Stewart, 175.

their own spontaneity, classlessness, flexibility, and currency.[19]

In this passage, critic Susan Stewart highlighted that, when placed on a wall and on a canvas to the exact specifications of art's professionals, graffiti was removed from its traditional location and context. By doing so, graffiti was no longer graffiti at all. Graffiti became an art world approved version of itself.[20] The art world could maintain its traditional strict definitions while still having people "lining up round the block to get in" to view the work of these "artists."[21]

The art world had extracted from graffiti the qualities that made it the subject of so much public disdain—its wildness, its freeness, and its confrontational nature. As a result, graffiti's essential artistic and contextual values and themes were also erased. The graffiti on gallery walls was not ephemeral, free, or interactive, and it did not permit the reclamation of urban environments. Art critics, curators and historians had drawn a line in the proverbial sand. Unsanctioned graffiti on city subways, private property, and public walls was not art; the controlled and rational graffiti on canvas was.

GRL's works straddle that line. The group was able to retain graffiti's qualities of freeness and antagonism, as well as graffiti's aesthetic and thematic values, as their work entered high art arenas. Whereas traditional graffiti had to be manipulated before engaging in art historical discourse, GRL managed to remain true to graffiti and to the group's mission as they exhibited in major museums like New York City's Museum of

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[19] Stewart, 174.

[20] Many articles also highlight that graffiti exhibited in galleries were also selected and promoted because of the artist's sociological and/or ethnographical background. Graffiti works were often praised for their "primitive" qualities and art professional marketed the works as amazing artistic pieces because they were created by untrained, disadvantaged youth. For more information regarding this approach to graffiti in galleries, reference Richard Lachmann's "Graffiti as Career and Ideology."

[21] Claudia Barbieri, "Graffiti Gains New Respect," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2009, Arts section, Special Report: Contemporary Art.

Modern Art. GRL discarded spray cans and felt pens and adopted tools and methods that other non-graffiti artists used. GRL's simple appropriation of technological media connected graffiti to other contemporary art forms, both aesthetically and thematically. By accessing art types that art officials, and society as a whole, were more receptive to, GRL's works could exist both in art venues and public space on their own terms and without compromise.

The following chapters will examine three projects by GRL: *LED Throwies*, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*, and *Light Criticism*. These works, created predominantly by Evan Roth and James Powderly, exemplify the group's strong ties to graffiti, but also the group's undeniable parallels to contemporary artists of other art forms/styles. Various themes will be discussed and developed as the underlying similarities between graffiti, its brainchild GRL, and three assorted art practices—performance art, public light/laser art, and projection art. The themes to be investigated have always existed within graffiti works, but the role they played with graffiti artists' motivations has been consistently unacknowledged or downplayed.

The remainder of the study will bring to light the themes of ephemerality, motion, interactivity, and reclamation of urban environment inherent in the work of graffiti artists, but given greater exposure by GRL. The existence of these themes in more canonical art forms as well will be argued as the catalyst for GRL's transition from the realm of graffiti culture to the world of high/institutional art. GRL's utilization of the same means and technologies as these canonical art forms is also a clear connection between these varying artists and will be stressed as a key component of GRL's success.

Each theme will be approached as an underlying link between a specific GRL work, the work of graffiti artists, and one specific work by a contemporary non-graffiti artist. Though the themes will be investigated individually, it is important to stress that they are all interconnected and that they are acting within each of the art forms. Motion and interactivity will be examined in GRL's *LED Throwies*, graffiti, and Allan Kaprow's performance piece *Yard*. Ephemerality will be discussed as one strong connection between graffiti, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*, and Rockne Krebs' public artwork *Sky Pi*. Finally, reclamation of urban spaces will be analyzed as the key motivation and theme in Jenny Holzer's projection project *Truisms*, graffiti pieces and GRL's *Light Criticism*.

II. Motion and Interactivity

Due to the illegality of graffiti, motion and movement have always been essential elements at play when creating and viewing a work of graffiti. All graffiti pieces, even simple tags, had to be done quickly. Graffitists moved swiftly to avoid being seen and potentially fined and/or imprisoned or because the surface on which they worked was not stationary. The experience of a graffiti viewer was also often intertwined, usually unconsciously, with the issue of movement because a graffiti piece was typically looked upon as one walked down the street or as a subway car passed by. A graffiti work was seen in flux, and for a temporary amount of time. Ephemerality is inextricably linked to the concept of motion. This conception of motion, and its temporality, was crucial to graffitists and to GRL, as seen in their work *LED Throwies*, and to performance artists, especially Allan Kaprow and his 1961 work *Yard*.

Interactivity was also a theme enacted in the works of early graffitists. Tagging forbidden surfaces was always a conquest of territory and "always an act performed for an audience."[22] The audience also took on a performative role in the viewing, and frequent removing, of graffiti. The motivations of each graffiti artist and graffiti piece would have been lost or inactivated without the viewer's participation in the graffiti works. The interactive dimension was a characteristic of the work and the artists, but also the viewers. This idea was carried on by GRL in *LED Throwies* and by Kaprow's performance *Yard*.

This chapter will examine more the role of motion and interactivity in traditional graffiti works and how GRL embraced these themes within their own work. More

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[22] Ley and Cybriwsky, 494.

background will be given on performance art in general and specifically on Allan

Kaprow and his work *Yard*. The discussion of this genre of art will highlight the thematic

and aesthetic similarities between performance art and graffiti art practice. GRL's *LED*

Throwies will bridge these two art forms further and demonstrate the group's unique

ability to achieve both the goals of graffiti artists and performance artists.

Graffiti

Motion and interactivity are both themes that arose out of graffiti due to its

placement on public urban surfaces. Originally, motion, in the execution and reception of

graffiti, was predominantly a by-product of practicality: a graffiti writer had to move

quickly to create a piece and, most often, their work traveled and was viewed in motion

by bystanders on subway platforms. As filmmaker Noelia Quintero observed:

> The origins of graffiti are inseparable from movement because
> of its display on subway trains. The speed required in the
> writer for the production of an illegal piece, and the perceptive
> motion of a walking or driving audience, are metaphors for a
> pervasively moving society. Thus, it is also motion that defines
> the aesthetics of graffiti.[23]

Motion began as an issue to overcome—an environmental factor that impeded the

successful creation and display of pieces. However, it was because of movement that

"these young artists managed to mobilize color, line, shape, and design."[24] Graffiti

writers, by embracing motion as a positive element of their artworks, started "cloaking

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[23] Quintero, http://www.artnodes.com/7/dt/eng/quintero.html.
[24] Ellen Handler Spitz, "An Insubstantial Pageant Faded: A Psychoanalytic Epitaph for New York City Subway Car Graffiti," in *Image and Insight: Essays in Psychoanalysis and the Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 44-47.

ugliness with bold imagery, vitalizing the dreary, and, minimally, catapulting into our visual field that which had been previously ignored."[25] Motion allowed graffitists to interrupt the mundane lives and alter the typical scenery of the populace. It was graffiti's sharp contrast against societal and environmental norms that caused it to gain much more attention, be it positive or negative.

Fig. 2 Image taken of Rome's subway system that reinforces the idea of motion inherent in creation and viewing of graffiti. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/joshclark/503328169 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

Graffiti was created in motion and it was "likewise perceived in motion—swiftly arriving or departing," as figure 2 demonstrates.[26] The art world valued permanence in artworks and the constant movement of graffiti works opposed that value. Though art professionals saw motion as a negative quality, graffiti writers maximized its potential. Graffiti in motion led to the "mobility of the name" and graffitists utilized subway cars as "travelling billboards" for themselves and their work.[27] Also, the aesthetics of graffiti

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[25] Spitz, 44-47.
[26] Spitz, 34.
[27] Stewart, 169.

would have looked drastically different without the speediness required in the execution of tags, murals or pieces. Dripping and smeared paint became marks of presence, marks of an artist operating against time and space constraints. The necessity of quick paint application also highlights that, for graffiti artists, the look of their work came second to their successful alteration of a surface or environment. This emphasis on process over product was indicative of the interactive element of graffiti writing.

Fig. 3 A passerby interacts with a graffiti work in London, England. Photograph obtained from http://img408.imageshack.us/img408/5470/graffiti.jpg and reproduced with permission from photographer.

As will be discussed later, themes of motion and interactivity were also key themes of performance artists and GRL. Graffitists' focus on the process, the actions behind or within the work, is especially comparable to the Kaprow piece, *Yard*, which will be investigated in the next section. Although graffiti has never been likened to performance art in the past, there were many similarities between the two. Both addressed issues of ephemerality, motion, and site. As such, graffiti was thematically linked to interactivity.

Theorist Ellen Handler Spitz acquired a manifesto written by a former graffiti artist. In that manifesto, the writer, who wished to remain anonymous, noted the interactivity of graffiti-making: "The actual execution of a piece is more of a statement than its style or content.'"[28] In essence, tagging or spray-painting was a performance for an audience, an artist acting out his/her societal, political and artistic frustrations. Just as a work of performance art was concerned with marking presence and exposing the process, not the final product, graffiti too was in this vein. Graffiti highlighted the innate interactivity between "performer" and "audience" and performance art, especially Allan Kaprow's work, would do the same.

Performance Art: Allan Kaprow's *Yard*

Performance art, like graffiti, has fluctuating dates of inception and those dates depend greatly on society's recognition of performance art as a valid art movement. In an article for *Sociological Perspectives*, sociologist Britta B. Wheeler highlighted performance art's problematic history:

> Performance art as a field of art, a 'movement' made up of a loose collection of visual artists, dancers, and theater practitioners, became institutionalized, deinstitutionalized, and reinstitutionalized over a thirty-year period, 1970-2000. Starting as a *subculture* in avant-garde conceptual art, it became increasingly recognizable as a cultural form and set of related practices and organizations residing both in and outside of existing genres and institutions.[29]

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[28] Spitz, 38-39.
[29] Britta B. Wheeler, "The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde: Performance Art as Democratic Culture, 1970-2000," *Sociological Perspectives* 46 (2003): 491.

However complicated performance art's institutional history may have been, it was generally accepted that Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), a collage and sculpture artist, was the forefather of this movement. Allan Kaprow began experimenting with collage in the late 1950s and eventually his experiments led him to create works in three dimensions, "from paper into people and action."[30] These pieces, or events, centering on the live, albeit structured, action of performers and audience became known as "Happenings" in 1958 and they are regarded as the beginning of the performance art genre.[31]

Before launching into an analysis of one of Kaprow's Happenings, *Yard*, and its themes, a brief discussion of performance art's general principles and history will demonstrate parallels between performance art and graffiti. Graffiti's natural habitat was outdoors—typically in urban spaces and on private property. Performance art too, especially before the 1980s, "took place on the street or in less established venues."[32] Performance art, because it operated outside art institutions and lacked a sellable, marketable, and tangible art object, rejected commodification and was thus labeled "deviant."[33] Wheeler discerned one likely reason for performance art's negative perception and inadvertently accentuated a great commonality between graffiti and performance art:

> Performance art is more democratic than other kinds of art because anybody can become a performance artist and have access to the world of performance art. Performance artists integrate democratic practices into the actual organization of their art and in doing so continue to reject the commodity aspects of art…Because of this ideal for integrating art with life and democracy, performance artists and entrepreneurs challenge the structure of the established

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[30] Wheeler, 495.
[31] Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 1.
[32] Wheeler, 497.
[33] Wheeler, 502.

'Institution of Art' as an elite practice and, in turn, help to make art worlds more democratic in aesthetic and social ways.[34]

However, performance art's democratic principles did not impede its adoption into art historical discourse; over time, performance art transitioned to a high art movement.[35] Performance artists approached similar themes of movement and interactivity, but did so differently than graffiti. GRL would later adopt their approach.

Performance art's emphasis on the theme of motion was undoubtedly connected to performance art's theater and dance roots and the works' temporality, its presence or 'liveness'.[36] Performance artists "believed the work was 'about' its ephemerality as interaction taking place in the present moment."[37] Just as graffiti works quickly entered and left the viewer's visual field, causing an imprint of that flash of color in the viewer's memory, performance art existed only in one moment in an effort to leave a lasting impression and experience. Interactivity, as a main goal of performance artists, was achieved through this necessary engagement with/from the audience and a strong focus on the performer's process.[38] Graffiti had "a mobile and temporary set of meanings" and they inserted themselves into the interstices of the public's everyday, normal scenery.[39] Performance art did the same through its "use of the real, the mundane, and the difficult." Art became "integrated with life," as Allan Kaprow's *Yard* exemplified.[40]

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[34] Wheeler, 509.
[35] Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow: Performance Art and Mass Culture," *TDR (1988-)* 33 (1989): 125.
[36] Auslander, 130.
[37] Wheeler, 497.
[38] The scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough historical trajectory of "process" and "play" in modern art. However, it is important to note that Dada artists first developed the emphasis on both these characteristics in art. Performance artists, in many ways, grew from the Dada tradition.
[39] Cresswell, 337.
[40] Wheeler, 495.

Allan Kaprow's *Yard* first took place in May 1961 at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York City.[41] *Yard* was part of the group exhibition entitled *Environments, Situations, Spaces*. For *Yard*, Kaprow filled the gallery's outdoor sculpture court with hundreds of used automobile tires and essentially transformed a backyard patio into a neighborhood dump.[42] Kaprow's piece was not the tires themselves as sculpture or installation. *Yard* was about the audience's movement through the space and their interaction with each other and their environment: "When the show opening, exhibition-goers were invited to walk out among the tires, to sit on them, or to move or toss them around, and many did."[43] The mounds of tires became a makeshift playground—a space and artwork that only achieved its purpose once the "audience" began to play.

Fig. 4 Allan Kaprow, *Yard*, 1961, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York City. Photograph by Ken Heyman. Reproduced with permission from Woodfin Camp & Associates.

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[41] The Martha Jackson Gallery operated from 1954-1964 first at 22 E. 66th St. and later at 32 E. 69th St. More background information on this gallery can be obtained from The Frick Collection's Research Database: http://research.frick.org/directoryweb/browserecord.php?-action=browse&-recid=6256
[42] Kelley, 58.
[43] Kelley, 58.

The idea of "play" was central to Kaprow's *Yard* and many other Happenings. In one particular photograph of the 1961 enactment of *Yard* (Kaprow would go on to "perform" this piece many more times, the latest in 2009), Kaprow pitched a tire across his body. In Jeff Kelley's *Childsplay*, a catalog of Kaprow's lifework, discussed how this action "was a much an instruction as a document; this is what he was inviting people to do."[44] Kaprow even had his three-year old son present at the site to reinforce this encouragement of play (figure 4).

Play, in this work and in general, represents both the theme of motion and of interactivity. One cannot "play" unless he/she is moving or being directly effected by movement. A helpful example is to think of an actual playground: one can play a game of tag and run around for amusement or one can go on a carousel and be spun around by a parent or friend. To play, one must be in motion. In *Yard*, the movement of the piece and the movement of the audience within the piece begot its interactivity: "Here, the artist and his audience shared a common ground, both stepping and staggering through the landscape of tires, which was Kaprow's way of incorporating the 'strict correspondence' between artist and viewer."[45] Interactivity and movement were vital to Kaprow's *Yard* and to performance art as a whole.

Motion and interactivity heavily influenced the visibility and effectiveness of graffiti and, as Kaprow's work has shown, those themes were equally as important in performance art. The crucial difference between graffiti and performance was the audience's knowledge of interaction and willingness to participate. Graffiti was technically ephemeral. It existed temporarily in the minds of viewers as it moved through

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[44] Kelley, 58-59.
[45] Kelley, 59.

the urban environment or and was easily removable and/or replaceable. However, graffiti works were viewed as anything but temporary by government and society.[46] Society saw graffiti as vandalism. Its "permanence" and "forceful" interjection into private and public space increased graffiti's negative connotations. GRL's *LED Throwies* combated these popular opinions of graffiti through preservation of the themes of motion and interactivity. The next section will discuss the methods GRL used to accomplish this task and demonstrate the work's indebtedness to both the tradition of graffiti and performance art.

GRL's *LED Throwies*

With its first display in 2006, *LED Throwies* was one of GRL's inaugural projects. Just as traditional graffiti mobilized color and line to reclaim urban landscapes and interrupt society's mundane scenery, *LED Throwies* covered the urban environment in bright light and colors. Technologically speaking, *LED Throwies* were the name given to small light devices that consisted of "a lithium battery, a 10mm diffused LED and a rare-earth magnet taped together."[47] As seen in figure 5, conception and construction were quite simple and inexpensive and the end product was a small, portable light that stuck to any ferromagnetic surface. The lights of the *LED Throwies* piece were typically "scattered by the hundreds over a public wall or sculpture" and created the impression of

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[46] Stewart, 169.
[47] Graffiti Research Lab, "LED Throwies," http://graffitiresearchlab.com/projects/led-throwies/#video.

holiday lights.[48] This work preserved graffiti values and its essential themes, but also obtained positive reactions and widespread interest and involvement. *LED Throwies* altered the public visual field through repetitious and uncontrollable additions just as graffitists did with tags and murals. However, unlike traditional graffiti, GRL's work engaged its viewers to the point of personal participation and outward acceptance. How did Graffiti Reseach Lab's *LED Throwies* obtain public approval without discarding graffiti's essential themes of motion and interactivity? Through the group's incorporation of performance art's specific approach to motion and interactivity, specifically Kaprow's idea of "play," *LED Throwies* became a work of graffiti that was not seen as taking over space, but working pleasantly within it.

Fig. 5 Photograph showcasing the simple materials and elementary construction of GRL's *LED Throwies*. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/secretdesignshop/2007272701 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

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[48] Rebecca Stern, "Culture Jamming: Adapting Public Spaces for Cultural Discourse," http://a.parsons.edu/~sterr301/temp/RStern_CultureJamming.pdf: pp.4-5. To see LED Throwies in action, see: http://graffitiresearchlab.com/projects/led-throwies/#video.

As GRL created this publicly-approved version of graffiti, they did not abandon the theme of motion that traditional graffitists had explored. For graffiti artists, the issue of motion played a role in the creation and display of their work and this remained true for *LED Throwies*. GRL embraced the idea of creating a work of art in movement. The throwies were often carried, out in the open, by GRL members and random individuals before being thrown onto the magnetic surface of their choosing. Figure 6 demonstrates their scattered placement on the Jim Kempner Fine Art gallery in New York City—one of the first sites to exhibit GRL's small lighted art pieces.[49]

Fig. 6 One of GRL's first *LED Throwies* displays on the Jim Kempner Fine Art gallery in New York City. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/99808592 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

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[49] Jim Kempner Fine Art is located at 501 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10011. The website, http://www.jimkempnerfineart.com/, described the materials of the building "Designed by architects Smith & Thompson, the critically acclaimed modernist-inspired structure of glass and Cor-ten steel is included in a number of books about contemporary architecture, and has attracted attention from all over the world." The façade especially attracted Graffiti Research Lab who saw the Cor-ten steel's ferromagnetic surface as an ideal display location for the inaugural *LED Throwies* execution.

To attach these lights to a surface, they were typically thrown, as the name suggests. Finally, as the throwies lost their magnetism, they would frequently slide down the surface they were placed upon or just drop off. GRL could have easily created more permanent works of art, works that did not travel, fade, or die, but the group intentionally did not. By designing *LED Throwies* with ephemerality in mind, GRL retained graffiti's theme and value of art in motion. GRL also preserved graffiti's tendency to be perceived in motion. In fact, the light nodes were frequently thrown upon city buses, trains and cars so that they would traverse the city, as figure 7 displays. Placing throwies on moving surfaces was no doubt a nod to graffitists' most common canvas: subway cars. By keeping their work in motion, the visibility of *LED Throwies* increased. Also, constant motion meant interrupted public space, which allowed GRL to force its work upon viewers and hopefully change their perception of their urban environment.

Fig. 7 *LED Throwies* placed on a train in Paris. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/243453680 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

Interestingly, GRL's interest and adherence to traditional graffiti's emphasis on motion was made more feasible by the advent of the Internet. In their video, "GRL: The Complete First Season," Powderly and Roth discussed movement and how the Internet, and placement of graffiti works on the Web, has elevated visibility levels even further: "Just like the trains moved it all over New York City, the Internet moves it all over the planet."[50] The utilization of technology has perpetuated the theme of motion from traditional graffiti to the contemporary works of GRL. Technology has also heightened the interactivity between the artists and the viewers. Compared to traditional graffiti, GRL's *LED Throwies* was much more successful at obtaining "public participation in the field of technology and graffiti culture."[51] Graffitists valued the interactivity between their works and their audience, but were typically unsuccessful at receiving positive responses to their pieces.

LED Throwies on the other hand, despite being a tool designed for graffiti artists, gained so much public interest that the project has been recreated many times, often by regular people with no artistic or graffiti background. In some instances, *LED Throwies* have even been made in classrooms and then thrown on the family refrigerator. The success of this work was due, in large part, to its technological design and the Internet. However, *LED Throwies'* adoption of a playful, not hostile, interaction, typically characteristic of Kaprow's Happenings, was also largely responsible for this graffiti project's favorable reception.

In a recent Master's thesis on graffiti, Stephen-Lee Farmer discussed the positive influence of technology on this artistic medium:

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[50] Graffiti Research Lab, "GRL: The Complete First Season," http://vimeo.com/3177042.
[51] Stephen-Lee Farmer, "An Evaluation of Graffiti as a Tool for Conveying Political and Social Messages" (Thesis, University of Plymouth, 2007), 24.

Many of the latest techniques encourage public participation and effectively act as tools to promote a greater social understanding of graffiti art…These technological developments give additional power to graffiti artists to convey political and social messages, allowing them to create larger, bolder, interactive and thought provoking artworks.[52]

LED Throwies was one such technological development. The project, through its interactivity between creator and participant, promoted improved understanding of graffiti throughout society and the art world. Throwies achieved this through their playful nature, which will be discussed later in reference to Kaprow's *Yard*, and through their easy replication. With a strong belief in open-source technology, GRL encouraged duplication of their *LED Throwies* by placing step-by-step instructions on their website. What is interesting about this Internet-fueled phenomenon is that the documentation (the instructions, pictures, videos) of the work became a work of art in itself. Most importantly, the interactivity between a graffiti work and its audience transitioned from a viewer's reaction to a completed work to a viewer's understanding of how that work was created. As artist and critic Rebecca Stern noted: "the way in which the community engaged with that artwork is by executing an instruction set, adopting, and remixing, and re-releasing the project."[53] The audience's role in works of graffiti became much more hands-on, similar to Kaprow's *Yard*, and due to the cheery playfulness of *LED Throwies*, the audience was much more interested in actively participating.

Traditional graffiti artists often worked under the cover of darkness and dressed in black clothing. These conditions were not ideal, but graffiti artists adapted to avoid fines or imprisonment. It was perhaps the secretive nature of graffitists' art-making that

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[52] Farmer, 32-33.
[53] Stern, pp. 15.

instilled in the public and in government officials such disgust and fear of their work. If in a matter of hours they could transform the appearance of urban space, what else could they do? GRL brought traditional graffiti out of the dark by creating a work made entirely of colorful light. Instead of hiding the process, GRL shared the work with the public, both in documentation and in performance, causing a shift in the relationship between urban dwellers and graffiti artists. As Kaprow insisted gallery-goers play amongst his tires, GRL encouraged public participation through choice of medium and availability of methods.

GRL ditched the spray-paint cans and developed a new, more audience-friendly form of graffiti. As the members of GRL noted in their three-part online biographic film, they were "almost using technology in some cases like a trick because people are easily seduced by technology. They're easily seduced by things that light."[54] *LED Throwies* demonstrated the power of technology and the effectiveness of light as a graffiti medium. Most importantly, the success of *LED Throwies* illustrated that by slightly altering graffiti artists' approach to the themes of motion and interactivity, popular opinion toward graffiti could drastically change. Graffiti did not have to be entirely removed from its context to be understood and appreciated. By simply providing a more canonical visual and thematic experience, and experience likened to a performance art piece, GRL constructed an opportunity for the public to reevaluate its views on graffiti culture.

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[54] Graffiti Research Lab, "GRL: The Complete First Season," http://vimeo.com/3177042. Margot Lovejoy in "Art, Technology, and Postmodernism: Paradigms, Parallels, and Paradoxes," *Art Journal* 49 (1990), page 262, discussed this same idea: "Today's electronic technologies provide possibilities for radically new conception of an art based on information exchange and interactivity."

III. Ephemerality

GRL continued exploring the valuable properties of light as a medium for graffiti in their most famous work to date, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*. According to Penny Balkin Bach: "Light permeates all human experience and is an element that the public can identify with on many levels."[55] The full extent of light's power as an artistic instrument is beyond the scope of this study, but light's ephemeral nature is crucial to understanding GRL's aesthetic and practical decision to use it as a tool for contemporary graffiti. The previous section briefly touched about motion's interconnectedness with ephemerality. This chapter will focus on the theme of ephemerality as inherent in graffiti practice, but also apparent in public light/laser artwork and GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*. The transience of graffiti artworks has always been an issue that has negatively affected its reception in the art world. Strangely, government officials and the general public viewed graffiti as anything but temporary and its "permanence" was their cause for complaint. Paradoxically, then, graffiti was condemned either way—if it embraced its ephemerality or valued its indestructibility.

Alternatively, there were some art forms that society and the art world accepted and revered for their temporality. Performance art was one such art form, but this chapter will focus on the ephemeral work from another genre of art that began around the same time as modern graffiti: public laser art. One artist, Rockne Krebs, will be highlighted as the forefather of this art form. His museum-sponsored laser work *Sky Pi* exemplifies the possibility for public and institutional approval of ephemeral works. I will then show how GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* served as a link between these two art forms. This GRL piece

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[55] Penny Balkin Bach, "To Light up Philadelphia: Lighting, Public Art, and Public Space," *Art Journal* 48 (1989): 324.

retained graffiti's aesthetics, style, and theme of temporality, but simultaneously altered

perceptions regarding that temporality. GRL's use of specific technological tools within

L.A.S.E.R. Tag—instruments similar to those in Krebs' *Sky Pi*—negated the art world's

unfavorable view of graffiti due solely to its impermanence. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* demonstrated

that, regardless of duration of display, graffiti works have lasting effects on their

audience and enduring artistic value.

<u>Graffiti</u>

As soon as graffiti writers stepped away from their tag, mural or piece, before the

paint even dried, the life span of their work was largely out of their control. A graffitist

surely recognized that his/her work would only be glimpsed for a moment when placed

upon certain surfaces, like subway cars. However, this choice of location was the only

decision regarding the work's temporality that the graffitist made. It will become

apparent in this section that the duration of a graffiti artwork depended greatly on the

viewers of graffiti, particularly city authorities. In the few cases when the government

was not responsible for the very temporary stay of a graffiti piece, its permanence was

marred by the environment or by other graffiti artists. Unless it was co-opted by the art

world and placed on a canvas, graffiti was always ephemeral, despite society's view of it

as otherwise. Graffitists accepted this transient quality. In fact, much of their style and

behavior was in direct response to the issue of ephemerality. This section will discuss

graffiti's inherent and uncontrollable temporality and the impact this theme had upon the

aesthetic and contextual values of graffiti. Graffiti's reception in the art world will also be addressed to illustrate the differing, and almost hypocritical, opinions of art professionals toward impermanence depending on the art form.

Graffiti began in the late 1960s as "tags." Tags were quick applications of paint or ink that typically represented the tagger's name, nickname, neighborhood, and/or favorite number (see fig. 8). Tags were the quickest forms of graffiti to execute, but also the simplest to remove. By tagging, the graffiti artist placed "their arts within the interruptions and interstices of social life, marking off a physical space for a time and inscribing it within an individuality both unique and ephemeral."[56] However effective at marking one's physical presence, tags became insufficient modes of graffiti. By the mid-1970s, major US cities had launched full-blown anti-graffiti campaigns and tags, though quite prolific, were disappearing rapidly.[57] This imposed temporality led graffiti writers to increase their amount of tagging, to develop more elaborate types of graffiti, and to place their works in less accessible places. The permanent evidence of a writer's existence was no longer paramount. Instead, graffitists focused on quantity and/or scale as the most effective way of influencing their environment and asserting their presence. Most important for the graffiti artist was not his/her personal style or his/her place or size of writing, but, as previously mentioned, his/her ability to "get up"—to make "one's mark as frequently and in as dispersed a fashion as possible."[58]

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[56] Stewart, 167.
[57] On page 331 of Cresswell's "The crucial 'where' of graffiti: a geographical analysis of reactions to graffiti in New York," the lengths to which officials were going to remove graffiti was exemplified: "Throughout the early and mid 1970s, when New York was facing bankruptcy, Mayor Lindsay made the fight against graffiti a priority issue on his political agenda and millions were spent in vain attempts to deal with the 'epidemic'. Guard dogs were placed in station yards, new types of graffiti-resistant paint were tried out, laws were passed forbidding the possession of spray paint in public places, special antigraffiti forces were created, a monthly antigraffiti day was instituted in which boy and girl scouts cleaned up defaced subway trains and public buildings."
[58] Stewart, 166.

Fig. 8 A photograph, taken in 2008, of a standard tag on a van in New York City. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/smoy/3424507784 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

In order to demonstrate their ability to "get up" and their artistic uniqueness, graffitists evolved from taggers to muralists. Graffiti writers often covered entire lengths of subway cars (fig. 9), or even entire trains, in an effort to increase their exposure in the limited amount of time their work would survive. Art historian Julian Stallabrass highlighted both the artistic merits and ephemerality of these works in his article "Advertising the Invisible":

> The largest of these works, covering the entire train, are surely among the most accomplished *conceptual* works of art; the writers risk their very lives to make them, expending much time and material in raising an image which will travel around the city for some few hours or days only, and will be glimpsed by thousands, as it flied through the urban landscape en route to its inevitable erasure.[59]

Graffiti was illegal since its beginning and graffitists did not anticipate the law changing, even if their works were now aesthetically similar to large-scale paintings. Graffiti artists made these murals and pieces regardless of how long they would last because the

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[59] Julian Stallabrass, *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 146.

ephemerality of graffiti was a certainty. If government officials did not remove a graffiti

work, there were other factors that would ensure its eventual erasure: the environment

and fellow graffitists.

Fig. 9 A graffiti mural by Jigl & Jisk, known as an "end to end" since it stretches from one end of the car to the other. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/photopunk13/2812597090 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

In a 2008 *New York Times* article, street artist Shepard Fairey highlighted the

awareness among graffitists of the impermanence of their work: "'Everything gets

messed with…You can't be too precious about it.'"[60] Graffiti artists had accepted the

changeability and ephemerality of their artworks because, from the very onset, their work

occurred outdoors and therefore was susceptible to many environment factors. Graffiti

was "always at the mercy of its environment; written over bricks, or metal rivets, or over

doors, it takes their material into itself; forever present day and night under sunshine or

street lighting, it may drastically change its character."[61] Graffitists placed their artworks

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[60] Melena Ryzik, "Closer to Mainstream, Still a Bit Rebellious," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2008, Art & Design section.
[61] Stallabrass, 141.

on inappropriate surfaces that traversed the city and, for that reason, transience was inevitable.

In the unlikely circumstance that anti-graffiti officials did not remove the work and the environment did not cause the work to fade or disintegrate, other graffiti artists would often assure a work's temporary display: "New graffiti is regularly written over old out of a sense of competition, or just because suitable sites have been exhausted."[62] One way or another, graffiti works—whether they were tags, murals or pieces—were ephemeral. Graffitists' choice to remain outdoors and to keep creating illegal art pieces, despite their temporality, was a testament to the importance of ephemerality in their work and to their resistance to commoditization. The impermanence of graffiti complicated its monetary value, aesthetic merit and artistic relevance. Interestingly, other art forms that embraced the temporariness of their works did not suffer the same complications. One of those art forms was public light and laser art.

Light and Laser Art: Rockne Krebs' *Sky-Pi*

In the 1970s, a genre of art developed that can only be described as light-based art. One particular artist of this medium was Rockne Krebs (1938-). Krebs' work with lasers, especially his 1973 piece *Sky-Pi*, will serve as the example of this expansive and wide-ranging field of art. Prior to analyzing *Sky-Pi* specifically as an ephemeral work of art, light as a medium for art-making must be discussed. The use of light, especially in the arena of public art, was most often transient so the question becomes: what made the

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[62] Stallabrass, 141.

temporality of this particular art form institutionally acceptable, whereas graffiti was banished for that very same quality? This section will provide some possible answers to that question. This approach will demonstrate that the theme of ephemerality did not affect all art forms as negatively as it did graffiti.

Light as an artistic medium had the great potential to alter space and one's perception of space. When manipulated contextually or aesthetically, light could also highlight the absence of meaning in a particular space or assign meaning to an otherwise meaningless space. In many ways, the medium of light was similar to graffiti. Before looking at the work of Rockne Krebs, a successful light and laser artist, it is important to understand the implications, whether intentional or not, of the use of such a medium. The Fairmount Park Art Association (FPAA) in Pennsylvania undertook a significant amount of research on this matter for a project that was never completed, entitled "Light Up Philadelphia." The FPAA's articles illuminated this uncommon artistic medium and presented light art as a valid art form. Light pervades all aspects of human experience. It is innately linked to many other themes of varying fields, and, regardless of its connections, is rarely viewed as a negative facet of life. I want to highlight the undeniable similarities between the use of light and the aims of graffiti.

Firstly, light can transform public spaces—both literally and figuratively. Light does not just occupy public spaces. Light animates spaces and restates "their specific presence in the public consciousness."[63] Architect Larry Rouch, a member of the "Light Up Philadelphia" committee, developed this idea further when he commented that light "has no material qualities and can be experienced only as color and brightness or as the

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[63] Patricia Fuller, "Bringing the City to Light: Public Art as Vision," in unpublished manuscript of *Light Up Philadelphia*, Fairmount Park Art Association, 1988: 23.

qualities it takes on when projected onto surfaces or objects."[64] Light and the

environment it inhabits have a mutually influential relationship. Just as graffiti was

affected by its surroundings and surface, so too was light. Light also changed the places it

occupied, just as graffiti physically altered the public surfaces it was set upon.

Light also figuratively affected space by modifying the perceptions of the

viewer's space, as Patricia Fuller, curator and public art advocate, observed: "The

qualities of light, both natural and artificial, within a space inflect our perception of it,

contributing a sense of well-being or of unease, openness and clarity, or isolation and

uncertainly."[65] A very basic example of this is fire, which is received in varying ways

depending on context and/or viewer. Graffiti, as mentioned, was often understood as

dirty, obscene, or as a symptom of madness or sickness. This perception of graffiti

inevitably ascribed the area containing that graffiti with the same qualities.

Light and graffiti both could quickly transform the viewer's reception of a

space—one more constructively than the other. However, for both to fulfill this task, they

had to stand out stylistically and contextually from the anticipated norms. Graffiti,

through the use of subways and buses, interrupted the public's visual field and

subsequently caused a reevaluation of that space. Rouch noted a similar situation

necessary for light to achieve its effectiveness: "For lighting to play an aesthetically or

metaphysically expressive role in cities, it must occur as a counterpoint to the featureless

ubiquity of conventional streetscape lighting, and it must act as a medium for ideas that

rise above merely utilitarian or commercial concerns."[66] Rockne Krebs' *Sky-Pi*, with its

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[64] Larry Rouch, "Light and Urban Culture," in unpublished manuscript of *Light Up Philadelphia*, Fairmount Park Art Association, 1988: 12.
[65] Fuller, 18.
[66] Rouch, 12.

green lasers that bounced off reflective surfaces as it traveled down a major Philadelphia street, provided just such a counterpoint.

In the spring of 1974, the Philadelphia Museum of Art released its annual bulletin. Amidst the discussion of recent acquisitions and other museum business was the following:

> The event arousing most widespread attention was Rockne Krebs's Laser composition Sky-Pi, which connected the Museum and City Hall with two intense blue-green light beams each evening for ten days. Generated by low-power lasers, the lights created a pattern above the East Court and a pathway one hundred feet above the Parkway.[67]

Created as part of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance's May Festival of 1973, Kreb's *Sky-Pi*, as pictured in figure 10, was so remarkable that when the "Light Up Philadelphia" panel assembled in 1988 "many recalled the dramatic and memorable effect of Krebs's *Sky Pi*, even though it had had only a three-week installation period about fifteen years earlier."[68] Although an ephemeral work of art, *Sky-Pi* had lasting effects and, most importantly, was sanctioned by one of the largest museums of art in the United States. For Krebs, the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibition was one of many large shows in which he had the fortune of participating. His works were shown all over the world and journalists from *Time* magazine, the *Washington Post*, and *The LA Times* were eager to interview Krebs and gain more insight into the man who had "pioneered an art form"—laser art.[69]

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[67] George M. Cheston et al., "Annual Report July 1, 1972-June 30, 1973," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 68 (Spring 1974): 6.
[68] Bach, 327.
[69] Jennifer M. Rice, "The Evolution of a Laser Artist," *Optics and Photonics News* (October 1999): 21.
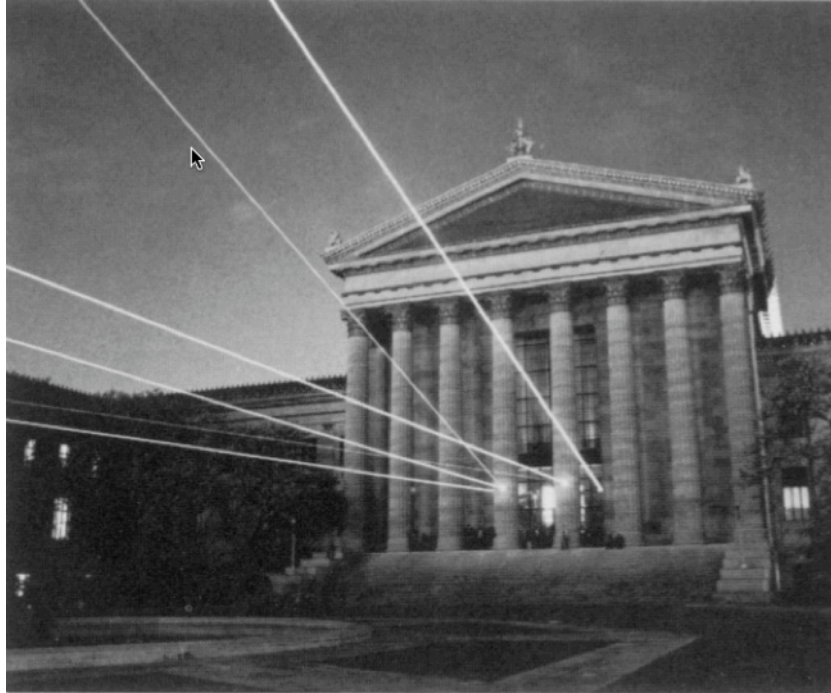
Fig. 10 A photograph of *Sky-Pi* included in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Annual Bulletin. Reproduced courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Despite his notoriety in the 1960s and 1970s, Krebs has since become less influential and less well known. There exist very few scholarly articles on Krebs, but it is clear that his main goal as an artist was to "present light as a means of art."[70] Prior to harnessing the artistic capabilities of lasers, Krebs attempted to produce artworks comprised simply of light. Originally he tried to use light from the sun and slide projectors, but was unsatisfied with the end product. In the article "The Evolution of a Laser Artist," Jennifer Rice described Krebs epiphanic moment: "In the spring of 1967 he saw a picture in a magazine of what would later define much of his artistic endeavors— the fierce color of a laser."[71] After this moment, Krebs spent a year in his studio performing experiments. In 1968, he was ready to exhibit his first laser art piece, "Sculpture Minus Object," at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.

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[70] Rice, 21.
[71] Rice, 21.

From that moment forward, Krebs became an artist whose only medium was lasers. Later in 1968, Krebs participated in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Art and Technology" program. The program "matched artists with high-tech companies to promote the use of technology in art" and presented Krebs with an opportunity to perfect his laser creations.[72] Questions over the safety of Krebs' laser beams arose, but had mostly subsided by 1971, as a *Time* Magazine article indicated. The magazine described Krebs' work as "'intense beams of red, green, and blue light slice through the darkness, rebounding from concealed mirrors to form an intricate lattice that almost abolishes any sense of bodily space.'"[73] Just as graffiti interjected itself into the private space of its viewers, Krebs too did so with his laser beams. In 1973 when Krebs exhibited *Sky-Pi* and bounced fierce light off of mirrors from the Philadelphia Museum of Art all the way down the parkway's mile-stretch to City Hall, he successfully used light to alter public space and the population's perception of that space.

The aesthetics of Krebs' work activated the space by offering a sharp contrast to the traditional lighting and architecture of the site, but it was the ephemerality of the work that was of the utmost importance to its success. In order for Krebs' *Sky-Pi* to retain its poignancy and perform its role as a counterpoint to the mundane and the expected, the work had to be transient. The effectiveness of *Sky-Pi*, and of graffiti, was due to its abrupt interjection into a space followed by its swift departure. The works "lasted" only moments, hours or days, but they consequently altered the space forever. Witnesses of *Sky-Pi* and graffiti works would no longer be able to look at the site of their display the same way. The minds of the viewers retained memories of the changed landscape, which

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[72] Rice, 22.
[73] Rice, 23.

forbade spectators from further assuming buildings and scenery were static entities.

Compared to Krebs' *Sky-Pi*, the ephemerality of graffiti was much less obvious to its

audience and this greatly influenced its social impact and response. Light, due to its

"ephemeral nature, its capacity to achieve the monumental scale of a landmark with great

structural economy, and its ability to project an image as a collective sign," made it a

much more successful art form at achieving positive public reactions.[74] GRL's *L.A.S.E.R.*

Tag harnessed Krebs' medium and, due to light's positive connotations, was able to tag

skyscrapers to the delight of society and the art world.

GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*

In works such as *LED Throwies* and *Light Criticism*, GRL's connection to

traditional graffiti was not always discernible since their similarities existed on deeper

thematic and contextual. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* was the work that firmly established the ties

between the GRL's work and the work of graffitists. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* blatantly

demonstrated its investment in graffiti culture by tagging buildings and other urban

infrastructure. The only difference, albeit a major variation, was the medium used to tag

the city's surfaces. Simply put, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* was "a piece of computer vision software

used to 'draw' on walls with a laser pointer,"[75] thus allowing artists to "temporarily tag

various locations digitally."[76] This technology created an aesthetic replica of spray-can

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[74] Fuller, 18.
[75] Stern, pp.4-5.
[76] Christy Collis and Tanya Nitins, "Bringing the internet down to earth: emerging spaces of locative media," paper presented at the Record of the Communications Policy & Research Forum 2009, University of Technology, Sydney, November 19-20, 2009:123-124.

graffiti (as figure 11 demonstrates), but removed the issue "permanent" defacement of property from the equation. Just as graffiti artists and light artists, like Krebs, embraced ephemerality, so too did GRL. However, by technologically altering the permanence of a graffiti tag through the use of lasers and light, GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* complicated ideas regarding graffiti's public reception and illegality. It was GRL's manipulation of light, to manufacture the appearance of graffiti writing, that allowed the group to have one foot in the world of graffiti and one foot in the realm of high art.
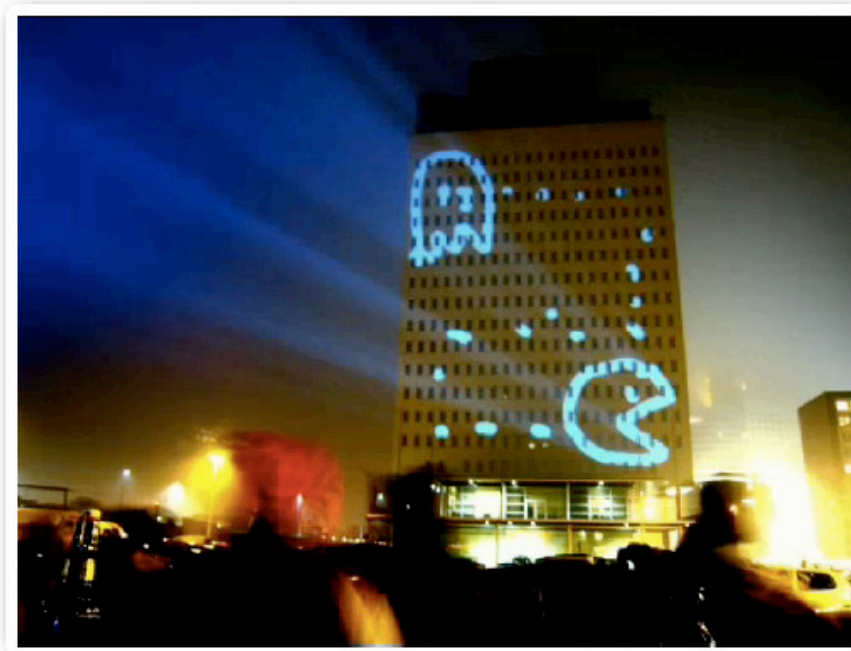

Fig. 11 GRL's first *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* piece, Rotterdam, South Holland, 2007. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/396087351 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

L.A.S.E.R. Tag was first displayed in 2007 although, just as with *LED Throwies*, it has since been performed/exhibited many times since with and without James Powderly and Evan Roth. Evan Roth worked directly with traditional contemporary graffiti writers to develop this project and, by doing so, "created a series of striking digital projections of

graffiti being "written" at night on various New York buildings."[77] Remarkably, there are no physical marks left on the building or the site, yet this work looks "shockingly real while it is happening."[78]

The GRL adopted traditional graffiti practices and aesthetics (i.e. tagging at night, choosing sites with high visibility, replicating the drip of spray-can paint, etc.), but, again, created a visual display that was much better received than its traditional counterpart. The positive reception of this work is even more surprising because of the fact that anyone can do it (courtesy of GRL's open-source technology) and that "they can actually communicate on a scale that's larger than what they would have before."[79] Referred to as a "Weapon of Mass Defacement" on the group's website, this project created even more visibility and made many more sites available for tagging.[80] However, through the use of lasers and light, viewers could recognize its impermanence and not worry over lasting building damage or "permanent" eyesores.

The impact of light and lasers upon public perception of permanence was evident in one particular enactment of GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*. In 2008, the GRL groups of New York and Rome combined forces to tag the façade of the Coliseum, as exhibited in figure 12. If a traditional graffitist were to have done this, he/she would have been considered disrespectful vandals and/or criminals worthy of prosecution. GRL members, although they altered and defaced this historic and cultural landmark, were not understood to be lawbreakers or delinquents—they were artists. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* did not adopt the common

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[77] Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists." To see L.A.S.E.R Tag in action, visit http://graffitiresearchlab.com/projects/laser-tag/#video. On GRL's website (http://graffitiresearchlab.com/projects/laser-tag), the group credits the following persons/groups for their assistance in the creation/execution of the first *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*: "A production of the GRL, Agent Watson, Bennett4Senate, and Huib Van Der Werf…brought to you by the rouge nation of the Netherlands and the Atelier Rijksbouwmeester."
[78] Dayal, "Devising Digital Techniques for Graffiti Artists."
[79] Graffiti Research Lab, "GRL: The Complete First Season," http://vimeo.com/3177642.
[80] Graffiti Research Lab, "L.A.S.E.R. Tag," http://graffitiresearchlab.com/projects/laser-tag/#video.

negative connotations of graffiti because it was in a medium that was intrinsically ephemeral. GRL's audience saw its work as a temporary artwork, not permanent defacement.

Fig. 12 A later reenactment of *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* upon Rome's Coliseum. Photograph obtained from http://fffff.at/fuckflickr/data/ROMA_2007/web/P1030044.JPG and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

The GRL, rather than shying away from the ephemeral nature of traditional graffiti, embraced it and used temporality to its advantage. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* became a transient event, almost a performance. Viewers were fascinated by the technology of the work and by the ephemeral aesthetic qualities of the light that quite often they forgot they were essentially watching the making of graffiti. Rockne Krebs' *Sky-Pi* shot laser beams from and to meaningful, historical monuments and architecture, which could have been seen as potentially harmful or, worse, permanent defacement. However, it was not. The public's understanding of the inherent temporal nature of light overshadowed the harmfulness or permanence; no light source is permanent: light bulbs die, candles burn

out, and even the sun descends. GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* recognized the artistic and thematic potential of using lasers—after all, it was Powderly that said in the GRL video that light had the power to seduce. Each time *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* was displayed/performed, strangers walking by stopped and joined in. During one particular *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* execution, a police officer who arrived to investigate the event ended up picking up the laser pointer and tagging the side of a skyscraper himself. GRL's work undoubtedly enticed the public, and continues to do so through its availability for replication in accordance with GRL's open-source model. More surprisingly, GRL managed to make this graffiti artwork appealing and valid for the art world. Perhaps the most important performance of *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* to date was in February of 2008. It was at that historical moment that GRL brought *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* into New York City's Museum of Modern Art.

Traditional graffiti had never been introduced in any art institution without compromise of its aesthetics, its values, or both. Graffitists were also never given the opportunity to exhibit in a museum anywhere near the caliber of New York's MoMA. GRL literally tagged the walls of this high art venue, as figure 13 shows, and they did so while retaining the aesthetic qualities and thematic principles of their graffiti predecessors. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*'s ink dripped and moved down the surface on which the work was projected. Museum-goers were encouraged to interact with the artists and participate in the work. Every few seconds the projected screen cleared and new light was tagged onto the museum's white walls. *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* was within the confines of art world and enacting graffiti's themes of movement, interactivity and ephemerality. Most importantly, despite GRL's move indoors, the group still reclaimed an urban space—a theme crucial to graffiti artists and to GRL's work as well. Graffiti was a subculture and

GRL did not abandon its ties to this subculture simply because high culture had

acknowledged the group's artistic merits. Figure 13 demonstrates how GRL preserved the

fourth essential theme of graffiti: reclamation of the environment for the sake of

individual expression, not popular or corporate interests.

Fig. 13 GRL making a very clear statement about its feelings towards the high-art world that consistently
excluded graffiti artists from their venues. Photograph obtained from
http://graffitiresearchlab.com/projects/mold-to-soma/#video and reproduced under Creative Commons
License.

IV. Reclaiming Urban Environments

The ephemerality of graffiti artists' works forced them to produce constantly. The frequency with which graffitists could "get up" was also imperative to accomplish the goal behind all graffiti writing: reclaiming the urban environment. One graffitist discussed in *The New York Times* his motivations for making graffiti: "I see it as reclaiming the city and shaping my urban environment."[81] The term reclamation implies a loss of ownership or authority. Graffiti artists believed that exterior space belonged to the people who inhabited that space, the people who viewed and interacted with the space on a daily basis. Graffiti was symptomatic of the public's loss of possession over the environment.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the public lost control over external surfaces when the urban scenery was overtaken by a new agency: advertising signage. This growing corporate presence did not represent the individualistic or personal aspects of the outdoor cityscape. Advertisers, and the large corporations they represented, used public space as a means to gain visibility for their products and services, and, thus, profit financially. Across every major US city, advertisements began dominating the streets, sidewalks and skylines in the form of billboards and posters, and later massive television screens. These new additions were legal and therefore generally accepted by society without question or complaint. The rise in graffiti at this same historical moment was in direct response to this advertising pandemic. Graffitists shared a common goal, which was to "take back

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[81] Andreas Tzortzis, "One Wall Down, Thousands to Paint," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2008, Travel section, Berlin edition.

control over the environments in which advertising and corporate identity has pervaded."[82]

This chapter will demonstrate that graffiti was not an act without underlying thought or purpose. Graffiti was a reaction to societal changes. Graffiti was a "mark of presence" and served as "the concrete evidence of an individual existence."[83] Society viewed graffiti as a defacement of its space, but graffitists were, in fact, just trying to take that space back from the homogenous corporate, capitalist system for the sake of the public and the individual. The populace misunderstood graffiti's most important goal. This misconception of graffiti impeded its positive reception and negated it as a valid means of expression.

Other artists, such as projection-based artist Jenny Holzer, operated during this same time period and shared graffitists' objective of reclaiming the urban environment. However, the purpose behind Holzer's work, such as her *Truisms* project, was both acknowledged and well-received as a critique of social and environmental issues. Her works were not perceived as vandalism; they were regarded as important political statements on consumerist culture. This chapter will showcase her work and highlight the parallels between her artistic inspirations and the ambitions of graffiti artists. GRL will then be presented, as it has been in previous chapters, as a link between graffiti tradition and contemporary, canonical art practice. GRL's work *Light Criticism* adopted graffiti's inherent antagonism to advertising as it simultaneously harnessed the successful elements of projection and LED-screen-based artists like Holzer.

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[82] Stern, pp. 12.
[83] Stewart, 165.

Graffiti

Since its inception in the late 1960s, the sole intention of graffiti-makers was to disrupt the mundane urban environment. Graffitists tagged and painted various surfaces in their cities to draw attention to aspects of metropolitan areas that, due to their abundance or repetition, had become commonplace. Tags or other graffiti works that were applied directly upon decaying buildings or advertisements forced viewers to recognize and reevaluate these aspects of everyday urban life. Graffiti writers saw the proliferation of advertisements as a symptom of a growing capitalist system centered on eliminating individual identities and interests in favor of unified consumerist values. Graffiti was, as Rebecca Stern defined: "an assertion of control over our environments against the oppression of urban planners, advertisers, and others who generate our manufactured landscapes."[84] Graffitists saw only one successful way to critique the oversaturation of advertisements and regain power from corporations and organizations. This task of graffiti writers would be accomplished by saturating urban space in equal measure with their tags, murals and pieces.

The ephemerality of graffiti certainly led to an emphasis on proliferation of graffiti, but rapid generation and regeneration was also paramount to graffitists for other reasons. A graffiti writer's frequency of production was a response to his/her environment—an environment that was dominated by advertisements and billboards far more than graffiti.[85] Repetition was a practice graffitists learned from their legal cousins, advertisers.[86] The scope of this study does not permit an in-depth investigation of the

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[84] Stern, pp. 12.
[85] Stern, pp. 12. This article is also a great resource for a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between graffiti and advertising.
[86] Stewart, 166.

relationship between graffiti and advertising, but the fact that it was a two-way street must be stressed. Advertising methods informed graffiti artists, but graffiti techniques that began in the 1970s also greatly influenced advertising.[87] However, unlike advertisers, graffiti artists were not tagging and re-tagging public spaces solely for publicity. A graffiti writer's purpose was to reclaim the environment that he/she believed rightfully belonged to the people, not corporations.

Graffitists' reaction to advertisements typically took one of two forms: reassertion of individual presence through tagging (tags which included personal information like name, nickname or address) or alteration of an advertisement's message. Figure 14 demonstrates the first method, or "reclamation of the environment through the label of the personal."[88]

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[87] As graffiti wrote on advertisements in an effort to highlight the impersonal and capitalist nature of their message, advertising manipulated graffiti for their benefit. Advertising adopted aspects of graffiti culture in order to utilize its success at grabbing attention. Graffiti was seen as a mark of presence that simply provided evidence of an individual's existence. Graffitists gained nothing monetarily from tagging surfaces so viewers unconsciously saw no ulterior motives to their actions. Advertisers incorporated tags and graffiti aesthetics into their designs in an effort to manipulate the audience into thinking the advertisement too had no underlying motivations, like marketing a product. Rebecca Stern's "Culture Jamming" article provides a thorough examination of this practice in the section entitled "Adoption of Culture Jamming Methods for Commercial Use."

[88] Stewart, 165.

Fig. 14 A graffiti artist's tag interrupts the advertising message of this iPod poster for Apple Computer, Inc. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/hellacutty/1088393109/ and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

Graffiti was "a consciously oppositional art," one that was performed, despite great risk (such as fines, imprisonment and/or violence from police), in an attempt to reclaim space and express universal sentiments of the urban population.[89] Perhaps the graffitist who tagged the site shown in figure 14 lived in that neighborhood and was frustrated by the constant onslaught of advertising imagery. Another possibility is that he graffiti writer was attempting to make a statement about the absurdity of publicizing an expensive luxury item on a bus stop. Those who typically ride buses do so to save money or because they have a lower-income. Publicizing something they cannot afford on a space that they will be confronted with each day was a blatant example of advertisers lack of awareness and/or concern for their audience's personal lives and space. Advertisements were designed according to corporate interests and their placement was determined by which

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[89] Stallabrass, 144.

location would provide the most visibility for their product. In an attempt to voice more egalitarian concerns, graffiti artists tagged these advertisements to assume power over their message and their site.

Graffitists reestablished their presence, and consequently the existence of each urbanite, in locations where advertising prevailed in a second way: through the manipulation of advertising images. Figure 15 shows a billboard in Portland, Oregon and exemplifies this particular method of urban space recovery.

Fig. 15 A McDonald's billboard altered by graffiti in Portland, Oregon. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/infinitewilderness/1035362799 and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

The McDonald's message was "I have a fresh cracked egg." The graffitist(s) retorted, through removal of letters, "I have crack." Graffitists would often alter the text of advertisements in a comedic and/or sarcastic manner. Approaching advertisements this

way not only provided evidence of an individual's struggle in an environment dominated by corporations, but also offered greater opportunity for societal approval or acceptance of the graffitist's message. If the hostility of a graffiti writer's alteration was downplayed by its ironic or satirical elements, viewers were more likely to respond positively to the message as opposed to react negatively to the fact that it was graffiti.

Unfortunately, society rarely understood graffiti as anything other than vandalism despite graffitists' democratic and communal motivations. Urban populations of the 1970s and 1980s frequently vocalized their distaste for graffiti and spent large sums of money on its removal, whereas advertisements were generally accepted as fixed and immovable facets of urban scenery.[90] Graffiti artists proclaimed their existence by tagging or revising advertisements, but they struggled to repossess urban structures overloaded with impersonal, capitalist agendas due to continuous negative perceptions of graffiti.

In the late 20th century, however, there were other artists who attempted to regain metropolitan environments for the same reasons and essentially in the same manner as graffiti artists, but with greater public appreciation and critical success. Jenny Holzer (1950-) was one such artist. The following section will discuss her work, with special focus on her *Truisms* project. Just as graffiti writers felt the "urge to publish in the street because it entails instant active audiences, and because the street embodies its own particular information and knowledge," so too did Holzer.[91] The large projections of her "truisms" will highlight the importance of public display to Holzer, as well as illustrate

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[90] Proof that advertisements were in fact not immovable fixtures of urban society is apparent in the case of Sao Paolo, Brazil. Larry Rohter's article, "Billboard ban in São Paulo angers advertisers," (*International Herald Tribune*, December 12, 2006, http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/12/12/news/brazil.php) discusses the removal of all of the city's advertising billboards and posters. Advertisements were banned in an effort to curb graffiti and other forms of public defacement.
[91] Quintero, http://www.artnodes.com/7/dt/eng/quintero.html.

the likenesses between her artistic motivations and the goals of traditional graffiti artists. The next section will also analyze *how* Holzer's work—although it shared graffiti's interests and approaches—obtained understanding and, thusly, endorsement from both urban communities and the art world. Comprehension and appreciation of the artwork's objective were necessary prerequisites to the public's recovery of their own domain. Without them Holzer's efforts would have been just as unsuccessful as the graffiti artists who came before her.

Projection-based art: Jenny Holzer's *Truisms*

In her Master of Arts thesis "Monument and Sign: The Intersection of Art, Advertising and Protest in the Public Sphere", MIT student Christina Adair Smith discussed the practices of a new group of artists that arose in the later part of the 20th century. Smith wrote:

> They create and enact transient events, "interventions", in public spaces in a way that both refers to the spatial language of the site and offers a critique of its dominant values. What distinguishes their work even further is their reliance on the instruments of mass media, and their interest in redefining its capabilities: the projector, the electronic sign, and the billboard are three such instruments whose potential for communication in the city have been creatively mined in their service.[92]

Jenny Holzer, beginning in the early 1980s, was one of the artists that performed these "interventions." Just as graffiti artists created their works outdoors in order to initiate a

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[92] C. Adair Smith, "Monument and Sign: The Intersection of art, advertising and protest in the public sphere" (Master's Thesis, MIT, 1999), 5.

dialogue between private and public space, Holzer and other artists like her began doing the same. Instead of spray-can paint and markers, they utilized the instruments of corporations and advertising agencies, which further reinforced the work as an evaluation of urban site. The group to which Holzer belonged was broadly referred to as projection artists and, like graffitists, they discarded barricades and interjected themselves into the physical and social spaces of the city.[93]

Operating outside of all institutions provided artists with a greater opportunity to unsettle viewers and subsequently alter their artistic, social and political values. Graffiti artists had recognized the potential of public display. So did Holzer:

> It's hard to shock an art audience...There may be a greater chance with the outdoor work that you might startle people so much that you have some hope of changing their thinking a little bit, or even prompting them to take some kind of action. You might have an incrementally better chance of altering something in the world with the public stuff just because you reach more people, and because the content of the writing is taken at face value, it is not dismissed as art.[94]

When artworks were incorporated into the urban landscape, the opportunities for heightened visibility, classless viewership, and social and political reexaminations among the audience were significantly increased. City populations were trained to ignore or reject graffiti but Holzer's work, despite the motivations it shared with graffitists, was regarded as art and accepted and promoted by art institutions. This acceptance was, in large part, due to her work's insightful approach to modern-day media and strategic incorporation of that technology.

Graffiti artists tried to reassert the presence of individuals and their sentiments in

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[93] Timo Ojala and Jurgen Scheible, "MobiSpray: Mobile Phone as Virtual Spray Can for Painting BIG Anytime Anywhere on Anything," *Leonardo* 42 (2009): 333.
[94] Diane Waldman, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Guggenheim Foundation, 1989), 16-17.

major cities by attacking posters and billboards with markers and paint. Their antagonism towards capitalist and consumerist culture was evident in their tags upon or modifications to ads. In most cases, this practice acquired the attention of the viewer, but not their outright support. It was the subtlety of Holzer's works, two of which will be highlighted here, that initiated a deeper conversation between her work, the viewers, and the state of the urban scenery. More importantly, it was her adoption of the methods of advertisers—namely LED screens and electronic billboards—that allowed her work to be a critique of these practices without being overly and outwardly hostile to them. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh noted the ability of technology to "establish a relationship with the dominant and dominating practice of mass culture, television, and thus reach new audiences"; this was true for Holzer and her technologically-enhanced productions of *Truisms*.[95]

Over the last fifty years, advertisers adopted more advanced means of urban communication, moving from paper billboards to large LED screens.[96] New media, like Time Square's Spectacolor signboard (see fig. 16), introduced in 1976, allowed for greater exposure, but also provided a slicker and more interesting alternative to the traditional advertising forms that had, over time, become commonplace.[97] Advertisers in all major cities, especially New York City, embraced these new forms because they were much more resistant to graffitists' markings and they permitted placement of more than one promotion in the same location. The public's reaction to the constant stimulation of the signs' bright colors and clever messages from advertising screens was either neutral

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[95] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works," *Art Journal* 45 (1985): 217.

[96] GRL used light-emitting diodes, or LEDs, for their *LED Throwies* project. LED screens are essentially many of these light-emitting diodes, which create a panel, that are used for television screens and billboard-size displays that are typically seen in large city centers.

[97] For more information regarding "Spectacolor" signboards, reference their website: http://www.spectacolor.com/

or positive. That response was due, in large part, to the popularity and prevalence of televisions.[98] The constant stimulation of their bright colors and powerful messages, as well as their likeness to television, caused society to have a much more positive view of advertisements than of graffiti. Holzer was aware of the very different opinions toward these two versions of urban communication. To ensure the effectiveness of her work, Holzer disguised the subversiveness of her messages in the new advertising technologies.

Holzer, because she understood the appeal of the more technological media, quickly progressed from posters to projections and LED screens: "I started using (electronic signs) because I thought the posters had underground or alternative connotations and I thought the signs were the official voice of everything from advertising to public service announcements."[99] From the beginning of her artistic career—Ohio University for her Bachelor's degree and Rhode Island School of Design for her Master's of Fine Arts—she had designed her work to create a dialogue between an individual's artistic voice and the voice of capitalism. She accomplished this exchange in most of her pieces by relaying very personal messages or truths by way of media typically reserved for mass, often corporate, communication. Her most famous project to date, *Truisms*, was the perfect example of this method. *Truisms* was first created in poster format, but reproduced later on large television screens and electronic billboards. It was this transition from one type of device to another that propelled Holzer's artistic career. More importantly, by shifting the form her artwork took, Holzer triggered public

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[98] Televisions were used to disperse information—information that needed to reach the masses quickly and effectively. By creating advertising screens that resembled and acted like televisions, the public was much more receptive to their message and their presence was a welcomed one.
[99] Waldman, 15.

reexamination of technological media, the types of messages usually voiced through these media, and the effect of those messages on society as a whole.

Holzer's work, like graffiti, customarily consisted solely of words. Many people denounced graffiti as art for many reasons. One of those reasons was that it contained no imagery. Visually, graffiti was just writing. How could it be art if it lacked all the traditional qualities of art and appeared to be meaningless scribbles? Holzer is the ideal artist to compare to the writers of graffiti because her work was typically language-based, not image-based. *Truisms*, for example, was simply a collection of aphorisms typed and printed on flyers and posters until they were later displayed on massive screens in various major cities. While she was given permission for the Spectacolor and LED signs, Holzer's posters were, as she put it, "street art as much as graffiti."[100] Yet, Holzer's work was met with critical acclaim and public praise. In fact, Holzer's pieces, especially her *Truisms* project, garnered her such respect and admiration that she received one of the highest honors the United States can bestow upon a contemporary artist. In 1990, Holzer was selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale and Holzer was "not only the first woman artist to be so honored, but also the first artist using the computer to receive such a distinction."[101] Holzer's achievements were undoubtedly linked to her work's confrontation of societal, artistic and environmental norms through appropriation of advertising's dominant modes and yet, despite similarities in motives and methods, graffiti artists could not achieve the same results.

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[100] Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Review: 'Art and Social Change, U.S.A.': An Exhibition Journal," *Art Journal* 43 (1983): 405.
[101] Margot Lovejoy, "Art, Technology, and Postmodernism: Paradigms, Parallels, and Paradoxes," *Art Journal* 49 (1990): 262.

In 1986, Jenny Holzer, with sponsorship from the Public Art Fund, the aphorism

"Protect me from what I want" (fig. 15) was projected on the Spectacolor signboard in

Times Square, New York City, the center of commercialism and capitalism:

Fig. 16 Jenny Holzer, "Truisms" (1977-79), Spectacolor Signboard in Times Square, New York City (1986), part of the *Survival* series (1983-85). Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

As one of the largest tourist destinations in the world, Times Square presented advertisers

with a perfect space for promotion of a wide range of products and services. Holzer's

Spectacolor signboard, from her *Truisms* series, was just one of the many large screens

that dominated Times Square. Its presence was symbolic for it emphasized of the urban

scenery's shift from public domain to the corporate sphere. Holzer "favored immediate

communication and broad distribution" of her messages, and this medium certainly

allowed for it.[102] However, this piece was not strictly about publicity for herself and her work.

PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT used "the commonplace to voice the subconscious" of the masses and not just the privileged few who traditionally saw her work in galleries and museums.[103] Graffitists marked advertisements to represent society's loss of control over their living space. Their work was a reaction to a commercialized environment—an environment they felt stripped each person of their unique identity to create one homogenous prospective consumer. Holzer was more successful at relaying this same sentiment. She did not place her message atop an advertisement, as graffitists did, but instead replaced the advertisement with her enigmatic message. New Yorkers knew that that space was designated for corporations and advertising agencies. By confronting their expectations, and their consumerist values with the phrase "protect me from what I want," Holzer forced viewers to reevaluate their perceptions of that space and its purpose. That reassessment and demystification of capitalist agendas enabled citizens to recover the urban scenery from commercialist systems and restate the control of the masses over environment and industry.

Holzer's Las Vegas strip LED display (fig. 17), another phrase from her *Truisms* project, also abetted public reclamation of common metropolitan areas.

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[102] Roberta Smith, "Art in Review; Jenny Holzer—'Protect Me From What I Want'," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2002, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/06/arts/art-in-review-jenny-holzer-protect-me-from-what-i-want.html?pagewanted=1.
[103] Lovejoy, 262.

Fig. 17 Jenny Holzer, "Money Creates Taste", *Truisms* (1977-79) Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York City.

Holzer's message here was even clearer. She highlighted the fact that these signs were

tools designed with the interests of companies and their beneficiaries in mind. Holzer also

employed the signs to provoke the audience to question their own cultural values—does

money in fact create taste? Viewers looked to these signs for guidance regarding what

items they should purchase and what events they should attend. By replacing that

information with a statement such as "Money Creates Taste," spectators were forced to

reflect upon the power of those screens and their own consumerist behaviors.

The tactics of both Holzer and graffiti artists were directed at advertising, but also

at the consumers who rarely questioned advertisements and their societal implications. In

the end, society was in control. Holzer highlighted the power of city dwellers by

providing an alternative message in a space where one group, advertisers, typically held

authority. Her *Truisms* "suggested, ultimately, a divergent authority, that of the

tenaciously subjective voice, that of the artist and, transactionally, the viewer."[104] By

manipulating the site of advertisements, but not the advertisements themselves as

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[104] C. Adair Smith, 7.

graffitists had done, Holzer accomplished the shared goal of restoring society's control over capitalist agendas in metropolitan areas. GRL's *Light Criticism* also demonstrates how graffiti-inspired artwork could extend this mission of reacquiring urban spaces.

GRL's *Light Criticism*

Graffiti artists tagged posters and billboards in their neighborhoods to confront issues of power and site. They also altered the products or messages of advertisements to accomplish their goal of recovering the cityscape for the sake of the individual. As the last section highlighted, Jenny Holzer was much more successful at obtaining public understanding of her work's similar mission. Holzer initiated a conversation and reconsideration of the cityscape by replacing advertising messages with her own in the specific sites in which ads were typically the only authority. GRL's mission was, as always, to equip graffiti writers with better tools for communication in urban settings. *Light Criticism* was one such instrument. With *Light Criticism*, GRL critiqued the omnipresence of corporations and various capitalist agencies in a manner that connected the work's social and political implications to both graffiti pieces and the public artworks of Holzer. Despite the project's clear ties to graffiti culture, *Light Criticism* received the same kind of positive public reception as Holzer's *Truisms*. GRL's similar approach to technological media may have sufficed in the efforts to reclaim cityscapes. However, without the *Light Criticism*'s strong emphasis on graffiti (and graffiti's close relationship

to advertising), GRL's project would not have successfully recuperated urban sites on behalf of graffiti artists.

GRL began *Light Criticism*, in collaboration with an organization called the Anti-Advertising Agency, in 2007. The Anti-Advertising Agency's mission is to create works that "calls into question the purpose and effects of advertising in public space."[105] This partnership arose from their members' collective belief that graffiti artists were treated like criminals while advertisers, who polluted the cityscape equally, were not. The Anti-Advertising Agency's website spoke of this prejudice: "And now, years into New York City's crackdown on graffiti writers and protesters, after we've watched our friends be detained, arrested, beat, fined, tried, and given real jail sentences, not a single corporate toy from any ad firm has had to do any time."[106] With these perceived injustices in mind, GRL created most of their work, especially *Light Criticism*. Traditional graffiti writers tagged advertisements as a form of rebellion against capitalist practices and to highlight the hypocrisy of the public disapproval of graffiti versus the public complacency of advertising. *Light Criticism* followed in the footsteps of its graffiti predecessors, by interacting with the new technological forms of advertising.

Light Criticism consisted of large, rectangular pieces of black foam core with strategically placed cutouts (see fig. 18). The cutouts typically formed letters that would create words in the center of these black surfaces. GRL highlighted the fact that its artists used a laser cutter to make the incisions but that "this project can be done with an x-acto blade, black construction paper, and duct tape for next to nothing."[107] To ensure a level of production parallel to advertisers, the medium and process had to be simple and easily

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[105] Anti-Advertising Agency, "Our Mission," http://antiadvertisingagency.com/our-mission.
[106] Anti-Advertising Agency, "Light Criticism," http://antiadvertisingagency.com/2007/01/23/light-criticism.
[107] Anti-Advertising Agency, "Light Criticism," http://antiadvertisingagency.com/2007/01/23/light-criticism.

replicable—comparable to the marker or spray-paint tags of graffitists. GRL also guaranteed the high reproducibility of *Light Criticism* the same way they always did, through open-source documentation: "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."[108] Once the black foam core or paper had been cut to reveal the exact word or phrase of the artist's choosing, the final, and most crucial, step was to find an advertisement with backlit display. The Anti-Advertising Agency offered examples of these sites, "bus shelters, display ads, television store windows," and encouraged ordinary city dwellers to "dream big, act now."[109]

As figures 18, 19, and 20 demonstrate, the words and phrases typically chosen by GRL referenced graffiti and highlighted the often-overlooked likenesses between graffiti practice and advertising operations. The most common cutouts in *Light Criticism* pieces read "Graffiti", "Advertising=Graffiti", and "NYC's True Graffiti Problem." All of these epigrams operated similarly to Holzer's *Truisms* when placed upon an LED or television screen. However, the political and social commentary of the *Light Criticism* pieces related specifically to issues of graffiti's reception versus the reception of advertising. Holzer's work dealt solely with reactions to advertising. As Holzer's messages flashed on large signboards and electronic billboards, *Light Criticism*'s messages moved in such a way that only video can capture fully.[110]

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[108] Tyler Cabot, "Graffiti Research Lab: The Next-Generation of Street Art", *Esquire*, November 20, 2007, http://www.esquire.com/features/best-brightest-2007/graffiti1207#ixzz0m96wqq2M.
[109] Anti-Advertising Agency, "Light Criticism," http://antiadvertisingagency.com/2007/01/23/light-criticism.
[110] A video that shows the creation, display and effects of *Light Criticism* is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rboHOj1FgYk.

Fig. 18 This image shows what the foam core and cutouts looked like before they were placed atop advertisements and essentially "activated." Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/367610623/ and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

Fig. 19 An example of GRL's *Light Criticism* in New York City that read "ADVERTISING=GRAFFITI." LED screens appeared above the entrances to subways and served as yet another site for advertisements. The black foam core was duct-taped atop one such display at the 14th Street station. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/367611248/ and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

Fig. 20 A close up of one *Light Criticism* piece that read "NYC's TRUE GRAFFITI PROBLEM." This image demonstrates the moving image, or advertisement, below the foam core that was responsible for the illumination of GRL's message. Photograph obtained from http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban_data/367610956/ and reproduced under Creative Commons License.

GRL's artists could have "permanently" defaced the technological media that advertisers employed, but instead the group chose to manipulate the media only temporarily. This decision demonstrated to the public that theirs was not an act of vandalism; the surface could easily return to its original state. More importantly, GRL likened *Light Criticism* to the works of canonical contemporary artists, like Holzer, who used these media for artistic and political purposes. *Light Criticism*'s appendage directly to the advertising screens was crucial because, then, it was comparable to a graffitist's tag upon an advertisement. This GRL project encouraged urbanites to reflect upon their own viewing experiences and environment.

Imagery and messages surrounded people daily. *Light Criticism* highlighted the hypocrisy underlying the contrasting receptions of two forms of urban communication.

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While society exhibited strong dislike toward the markings of individuals, more commonly known as graffiti, their environment was being overrun by the markings of large corporations and advertising agencies. *Light Criticism* brought into sharp focus the public's paradoxical indifference to graffiti's legal counterpart. Like Holzer, GRL caused a reevaluation of cultural values through the subtle manipulation of what was expected and what the group provided. GRL muddled public perception of what was commonplace and for what reasons, actions that subsequently sparked viewer's reevaluation of advertising and graffiti, two of the most familiar features of city life. *Light Criticism*, with its low-tech design and simple construction, reintroduced the mark of the individual in the homogenous, corporate, technological city landscape.

V. Conclusion

Since its ascendance in the 1960s, graffiti, especially in New York City, has occupied a problematic space in the urban environment and, consequently, in art historical and public discourse. The Graffiti Research Lab undertook graffiti's motivations and methods and devoted the group's energy to creating new technological graffiti forms for graffitists to use. However, GRL's work avoided inheritance of the public's negative reception of graffiti by fostering aesthetic and thematic associations, whether intentionally or unintentionally, between GRL pieces and canonical public artworks. It was these connections between GRL and these other, more accepted art genres—like performance art, light art and projection art—that also caused a reevaluation of traditional graffiti. This reassessment finally allowed for the artworks of graffitists, and of GRL, to be incorporated into major art institutions without compromise to their visual or contextual values.

Graffiti's essential qualities or themes, which GRL later adapted for its works, were motion, interactivity, ephemerality, and reclamation of urban environments. Since GRL's work retained these qualities as they exhibited in esteemed art spaces, graffiti proper was finally able to be situated within the art world as well. GRL not only gained favorable reviews from art professionals, but also from the general public. The group has grown substantially, with many factions across the globe, and frequently non-GRL members have recreated or participated in various GRL pieces. GRL positively affected perceptions of its work, and of graffiti in general, by incorporating appealing technological media into traditional graffiti, encouraging viewer participation through open-sourcing and by creating associations to various canonical art practices. GRL made

slight modifications to graffiti, but triggered monumental shifts in its valuation by creating a dialogue between the artistic qualities of graffiti and the characteristics of numerous canonical art forms.

The motion and interactivity inherent in graffiti's execution were two themes GRL adopted and adapted for its own designs. Like the traditional graffiti artworks that came before, GRL's *LED Throwies* project was created and perceived in motion. The group valued open-source documentation for its works because it recognized the importance viewer interaction and participation. The playfulness of the GRL projects, such as *LED Throwies*, also reiterated the significance of viewer /artist interactivity. The playfulness was comparable to the concept of "play" developed originally by Dada artists, but embraced by Allan Kaprow and other performance artists in the 1960s and 70s. Kaprow's *Yard* was a canonical artwork that highlighted the place for both motion and interactivity in works beyond graffiti pieces. The audience's interaction with *Yard* serves as a useful comparison to GRL's *LED Throwies*; neither was considered complete without the participation of the public who were responsible for activating the works of art. By retaining graffitists' emphasis upon movement and interactivity, the *LED Throwies* project was undeniably a graffiti artwork—essentially tagging urban surfaces with light. However, GRL's work was well-received by the public and the art world. The group explored the potential for 'play' and there by removed the common perception of graffiti as hostile. Without the artistic and thematic reference to play in canonical works, like Kaprow's *Yard*, the intention of *LED Throwies* could have easily been lost and GRL could have been viewed simply as vandals, like traditional graffitists.

The second theme of graffiti that GRL perpetuated, but modified slightly through the incorporation of new media, was ephemerality. Graffiti's ephemeral nature was originally out of the artist's control. The longevity of a graffitist's work was dependent upon many environmental and social/political factors. Over time, graffitists embraced the inevitable temporality of their works and retaliated through frequency of output. GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* and the more canonical work *Sky-Pi* by Rockne Krebs were also impermanent art pieces. However, both were designed by the artists to be as such. GRL recognized the value of proliferation, but approached issues of production in a slightly different way. Instead of heightened visibility through repetition, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* combated its own temporariness and achieved greater exposure through scale and uniqueness of medium. GRL's laser projection shared a visual history with Krebs' *Sky-Pi*, yet its aesthetics were similar to graffiti. More importantly, because *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* was of a similar medium to Krebs' work, the audience knew it was a temporary piece. The public disliked traditional graffiti because it was "permanent" vandalism of city spaces. By tagging buildings in light, an ephemeral medium, the impermanence of the work was accentuated and viewers could focus on the visual and political elements of this graffiti-based artwork. The public and the art world positively received *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* because it provided spectators with an acceptable form of graffiti. Consequently, by recognizing the artistic merit of GRL's piece, perceptions toward graffiti in general also shifted.

Graffiti, since its very first tag, was always about marking one's presence in an overwhelmingly homogenous metropolis. As public outdoor advertising expanded, graffitists' actions were aimed more specifically at regaining these sites for the sake of

the individual. GRL and its mission grew directly out of this graffiti tradition and their project *Light Criticism* demonstrated that. Where GRL succeeded and graffiti failed was at the manipulation of advertisements in order to reclaim those spaces for the general public. The tags of graffiti artists upon advertisements just added ocular pollution to an already overburdened location. Their writings were not seen as a label of the personal upon corporate brands; they were acts of illegal vandalism. Jenny Holzer, the popular and respected projection-based artist, found one successful way of reclaiming urban environments by manipulating the media of the advertising, instead of the advertisement itself. GRL's *Light Criticism* did the same. Viewers responded positively to Holzer's large-scale, digitized versions of her *Truisms* project because they altered expectations and promoted individual reexamination of a site. Similarly, *Light Criticism* exploited the media that had pervaded the urban scene to relay a very different message than the advertisers had hoped. *Light Criticism* alluded, quite obviously, to the relationship between graffiti and advertising and forced urbanites to question their accepted notions regarding these two different urban communications. It was that reinvestigation into societal norms that elevated the status of graffiti as art and sparked society's reclamation of the city landscape from corporations and advertising agencies.

Graffiti Research Lab's mission was first and foremost to promote graffiti and its continued urban proliferation. In such a technological age, new media and artistic forms were constantly emerging. GRL recognized the potential for new technologically-based mediums in the creation of graffiti imagery and designed *LED Throwies*, *L.A.S.E.R. Tag*, and *Light Criticism* accordingly. These three works of art represented traditional graffiti practice and often incorporated graffiti's aesthetics and themes. However, they also

exhibited qualities that deviated from standard graffiti ideas and execution. Whether

intentionally or not, GRL developed art that both shared a connection to canonical art

mediums and forms and precipitated a revaluation of graffiti as art. Viewers, including art

professionals, saw parallels between GRL's projects and certain celebrated genres—like

performance art, light art, and projection art. These associations could not deny the

artistic merits of GRL's work. GRL was absorbed within the art world, and

consequently—given GRL's undeniable indebtedness and relationship to graffiti—

graffiti was also finally able to enter the fray as a valid art form.

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