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As Street Art Goes Commercial, a Resistance Raises a Real Stink

By [COLIN MOYNIHAN](#)

The covert campaign targeting street art began about seven months ago, with blobs of paint that appeared overnight, obscuring murals and wheat-pasted art on walls in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan. Arcane messages were pasted at the sites, but it was difficult to ask for an explanation. The author was never identified.

Then in November, during a panel discussion on women and graffiti that included a street artist called Swoon, a figure wearing a hooded sweatshirt flung a sheaf of fliers using similar language from a balcony overlooking an auditorium at the [Brooklyn Museum](#). Swoon was among those whose work had previously been struck by paint, and some couldn't help wondering whether the person who threw the fliers was also the Splasher, as the perpetrator of the paint attacks had come to be known.

Web sites, magazines and newspaper articles reported about the splatterings. Some wondered about the motivation and identity of those responsible, but the Splasher — or Splashers — remained anonymous.

The most recent episodes came this month, in two incidents involving what seemed to be stink bombs lobbed at shows of street artists on the Lower East Side and Dumbo. And some in the art world believe the identify of the Splasher may have been revealed. Last Thursday night James Cooper, 24, was arrested at the Dumbo show after witnesses accused him of attempting to ignite a homemade incendiary device in a metal coffee canister.

Mr. Cooper was charged with third-degree arson, reckless endangerment, placing a false bomb, criminal possession of a weapon, harassment and disorderly conduct. He was arraigned and released on his own recognizance, a spokesman for the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office said.

That show featured works by Shepard Fairey, who had been one of the prominent targets of the street splatterings. Mr. Fairey said there wasn't yet enough evidence to tie Mr. Cooper definitively to the paint blobs, but acknowledged apparent parallels. "Maybe the stink bomb thing was their way of being disruptive without using paint and while penetrating a more controlled atmosphere," he said.

Two days after Mr. Cooper's arrest, a group of people showed up at the Jonathan LeVine Gallery in Chelsea, where a reception was being held for Mr. Fairey. Without identifying themselves, they distributed copies of a 16-page tabloid with the title "If we did it this is how it would've happened," with a cover photograph of an image created by Mr. Fairey defaced with paint.

Inside were reproductions of the communiqués that were pasted next to the sites of many paint attacks and appeared to draw inspiration from the writings by the Situationists, a group of political and artistic agitators formed in the 1950s, and a 1960s anarchist group called Black Mask.

In often bombastic language those fliers condemned the commercialization of art and included statements saying that the wheat paste used to affix the fliers had been mixed with shards of glass. An essay in the paper given out at the gallery scoffed at those who had difficulty understanding the fliers and added footnotes clarifying parts of them. One footnote stated that the tabloids had been dusted with anthrax.

In a series of essays and in text that appeared under the headline "Interview With Myself" the anonymous authors said that the splashings were committed not by an individual but by a group of men and women, and offered some explanation of their motives.

The authors wrote that street art was "a bourgeoisie-sponsored rebellion" that helped pave the way for gentrification, and called it "utterly impotent politically and fantastically lucrative for everyone involved."

The writings also criticized people prominent in the world of street art, including Mr. Fairey and Swoon, the art collectives Faile and Visual Resistance, and Marc and Sara Schiller, who run a Web site about street art called the Wooster collective (woostercollective.com).

"There is a very strong viewpoint there, and there's an element of interest I can't deny," Mr. Schiller said. Still, he said, "I don't agree with the perspective and I don't think the assumptions are accurate."

Previous incidents of agitprop were described, and the authors claimed responsibility for assailing a mural in Williamsburg by the reclusive British artist known as Banksy, and for hurling paint at a billboard advertising sneakers on Lafayette Street made by an artist called Neckface. Because the authors are unidentified, it isn't known for sure whether they are indeed the Splashers. An e-mail address was published

in the paper but a message sent by a reporter to that address on Tuesday night went unanswered.

The distribution of the paper at the gallery and its mailing to two Web sites that write about street art has stirred speculation, but many artists remain focused on Mr. Cooper, who so far is the only person who has been publicly identified as having a possible connection to the art attacks.

In a brief interview on Tuesday morning conducted near his home in Bushwick, Brooklyn, Mr. Cooper declined to discuss details of his case but said that he was not guilty of wrongdoing and that he was not the Splasher.

Still, Jonathan LeVine, a gallery owner who was at the Dumbo show, insisted that Mr. Cooper was one of two men seen trying to light a device and who fled when approached.

“One of the two people came back and guys I know grabbed him,” Mr. LeVine said. “The two people were together by all accounts.”

The man who was grabbed was Mr. Cooper. He waited, crouched in a corner of the 6,600 square-foot space, as some of the 14 security guards hired for the event stood nearby. Then the police arrived and arrested him.

The man who was said by witnesses to be with Mr. Cooper made it out of the show. But people involved in street art said that detectives are searching for a second suspect and are also inquiring about the newspaper.

Although the paint splashings have been viewed with a mixture of aggravation and amusement, Mr. LeVine said that the attempt to light an incendiary device during a crowded art show was foolish and reckless.

“They could’ve killed someone,” he said. “It’s not O.K. to jeopardize people’s lives.”

The earlier suspected stink bomb attack took place June 7 when a show in an exhibition space on Chrystie Street displaying work by a two-man street art collective called Faile was disrupted by a noxious odor that witnesses said smelled like sulphur. Firefighters arrived, said a member of Faile, and said that somebody had called in a report of a gas leak.

“This kind of thing is silly,” said the Faile member, who declined to give his name. “They’re hiding themselves so you can’t have a discussion with them.”

Perhaps the street artists will eventually have a chance to confront their antagonists directly. One of the last pages of the newspaper published by the self-proclaimed Splashers sounded a note that could be interpreted as ominous, or optimistic, depending on your point of view.

“Don’t worry,” it read. “You’ll be hearing from us again.”

Al Baker contributed reporting.