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Grandiloquently and Clearly: The Mind of the Scrawler

By Justin Wolf

Just take a look at the history of mankind – and what do you see?

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

How am I going to hang all this stuff?

- Harley Spiller

A man teeters on the edge of a bench on a subway platform. He's tattered and fringed, presumably homeless, but this isn't certain. Whether it's rush hour on the 4/5 or 3 am and raining somewhere in Astoria, he barely notices; he is void of context. He doesn't announce that he is a veteran who recently lost his home to fire and that his four children are hungry. The words 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry for the interruption' never leave his mouth. He's not selling batteries. He just sits there, tormented with questions. Now he's playing with his hands, or, not so much playing as conducting the air in front of him, curling his fingers and jutting his wrists in some frantic, improvised sign language. But he knows what it all means. We've all seen this man before. He's writing his scrawl.

Approximately one year ago, I solicited an essay for *canon* entitled '[Notes from the Bathtub in the Kitchen](#)', by Harley Spiller. Inspired in part by Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Spiller's essay explored the depths of his own fascination with NYC's "denizens who yearn to publish, to be heard, to stop wriggling along like eels and do something to right wrongs..."

In 1985, Spiller began collecting (one might say copyright infringing) random pieces of found paper, cardboard, and even weathered lumber, on which "street authors" had inscribed their various philosophic laments, algorithms, and – just so I don't bestow too much praise – xenophobic rants ('Anarchist Swine Just Go the Fuck Home You Cretins!'). Many of the authors are homeless, some gainfully employed, while others simply walk (and talk) that fine line between street-haunting philosopher and racist lunatic. Of course, we'll never know for sure. But in the very act of writing down what Spiller happened upon, these people brought what would could be called renegade academia to life, contributed to the unheard manifesto, and made objects that may have been better left unfound. Duchamp would've been proud.

This past September, Spiller's project, now over twenty years in the collecting, entered its next phase with "[SCRAWL](#)", an exhibit housed at the Apexart Gallery in Tribeca. SCRAWL illustrates a stunning, often callous freedom of expression.

A select grouping of scrawls (a mere fraction of his total collection) was chosen by Spiller and tacked to the white walls of the gallery. The result was what one might call bare-bones curation. Originally he wanted to re-create a street scene inside the gallery, with displaced lamp-posts and even a mailbox scattered amidst the scrawls, to somehow lend the atmosphere a gritty authenticity. But Apex's director Steven Rand, who worked closely (and at times contentiously) with Spiller on the curation, balked at the idea. Rand believed such additions would appear kitschy, and strip away whatever authenticity was left by placing the scrawls inside a gallery. (When not on display, the scrawls are stored in clear plastic folders, secured inside a typical three-ring binder. Whenever Spiller peruses the contents of the binder, he feels guilty for having taken them away from their home. He sees each scrawl as some happy-go-lucky street urchin who just doesn't belong in the orphanage.)

I visited Apexart on SCRAWL's second-to-last day, a blustery Friday in early October: the ideal conditions for discovering a stray scrawl getting carried away on a steady wind along the neighborhood blocks. I didn't see any scrawls on the street that day, but I'm certain that I wasn't looking hard enough.

Inside the gallery, a long wall to the left appeared to be cut in half laterally by a row of tiny scrawls, posted at eye level, written on torn pieces of note paper, recycled pamphlets, faded newspaper clippings, even a dollar bill – few of them any larger than a few square inches. Here is a sampling of what comprised the wall's dividing line:

... '\$Bill Bradley President 2000' ... 'Crass Not Class in Fur' ... 'Deport More Irish' ... 'Nixon '92' ...
'Half of NYC's Fags Have The Aids' ... 'Gulf Canada Gas + Oil Stock Cheap'...

I found myself thinking more about *who* penned these mini-diatribes and political endorsements rather than *when* they came to be, apart from 'Deport More Irish', which I envisioned being scrawled by an angry pedestrian, getting flanked by several drunkards as they stumbled out of a pub on St. Patrick's Day.

No wrinkles were pressed or corners hemmed; nothing fit flush on the wall, which gave me the urge to touch everything I saw, to somehow fix or adjust them, as if they were lopsided picture frames. They were, according to Spiller, "just freakin' tacked up there ... as close to their natural state as possible."

The long wall gave way to a corner of the room, where various scrawls began to dance in a less restricted space; some overlapped one another while others sat alone, posted over the edges of an anonymous door with no knob. "This corner used simply to be the place where I lived," proclaims Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, "but now I've thoroughly settled into it and made it my home."

In the exhibition's brochure Spiller asks, "Are the jam-packed pages of SCRAWL a result of horror-vacui (the fear of empty space)? Are these outbursts stirred by oppressive feelings that there's not enough room for what needs saying?" Whatever needs saying – if these scrawlers are in fact contemporary *Underground Men* – it's that the freedoms which we're all so accustomed to are not uniform.

And what of this *horror-vacui*? Many of us academics tend to believe that our work and our intelligent rants assuage any such fear – there is no empty space because our collective mind fills it with knowledge and, on occasion, research. Or is it all just white noise? “I’m a chatterbox,” says the Underground Man, “a harmless, annoying chatterbox, like we all are. But what can be done about it if the direct and single purpose of any intelligent person is to chatter, that is to say the deliberate pouring of emptiness into the void?” I thought to myself, how thin is this line that separates us from him? Is his law of nature so different from ours? The Underground Man cries out, “God Almighty, what do I care about the laws of nature and about arithmetic, when for some reason I don’t like these laws or ‘twice two is four’?”

Why can’t twice two be five? On the outside chance that such a thing can be proven, these scrawlers, these Underground Men pick up their pens. They’ll get to the bottom of things. Of course, it’s tangled logic for anyone to *conclude* that twice two is five, but that’s not the point here. The law of nature – the freedom, if you will – put into practice here is the *quest* to prove it. We look at such quests, either fluttering in the streets or posted to an art gallery wall, and we think, ‘What petty dissipations these are. What raving loonies these scrawlers must be.’ Given our law of nature and the academic freedoms we practice, we would be right. But one’s total inability to hold down a job is not synonymous with mental illness. (This is an obvious assertion, yes, but think of how easily this false equation is drawn, as we pass that same homeless man holding that same cup, quivering, twitching, day after day.) A few scrawls are the products of mad men, who conclude things like ‘twice two is five’ and don’t bother to examine the claim, who write ‘Deport More Irish’ and have blind hatred in their eyes. But when it came to SCRAWL, Spiller chose carefully.

Making my way around the room, passing a few indecipherable algorithms and more political endorsements (someone *really* liked Bill Bradley!), I spotted a pink flyer, de-wrinkled, with the typed heading, ‘PROSTITUTION REFORM’. Section 4 of the flyer reads:

4- TOPLESS CLUBS

Reduce libido’s sex drive in the topless clubs,

Ending the need to full fill sexual satisfaction through prostitution and sexual penetration.

In turn providing a social cultural cure against AIDS and STD’S. G – MEN

A. Masturbation law in topless clubs repealed; with regulation. Man must not ex pose him self and secretion must be confined inside clothes.

How rational is this, the desire to reduce sexually transmitted diseases, albeit through unconventional means? The proposed reform’s methodology sounds plain kooky, yet the motive is sane ... Hell, it’s down right necessary! Still, we laugh at the former.

Not long after the show closed and the scrawls returned to their three-ring binder, I met with Spiller and discussed with him, among other things, the differences between SCRAWL and graffiti culture. “There are no laws,” Spiller said to me, referring to the scrawlers, “it’s a lawless culture. But I don’t think in SCRAWL, I don’t think ... it’s a different thing, the graffiti guys are trying to all get fame, right? These guys are not trying to get fame. They’re trying to spill their guts, and trying to put their *message* out to the world. Graffiti guys put their *name* to the world.”

Truth be told, a few scrawlers' names are present in their work, they just happen to be bizarre pseudonyms that no one would associate with, well, human beings. More so, the pseudonyms are integral to the message, and in most cases, both are impossible to decipher. "When I started this project," Spiller continued, "my wife made a Power Point of a hundred images, and in them were graffiti stickers that said 'Showbiz, X.O.B.E.S.', a name some guy picked for himself. 'Smoke a dime bag, stomp a fag, and my pants still sag.' That was like scrawl – that was very close to scrawl. But then I needed to narrow it down, I needed to focus, focus, focus ... These are anonymous!"

By far, the biggest example of this is 'Phone Block Escort Service', who is the author of 'PROSTITUTION REFORM', among many, many other scrawls. For a time (maybe a year by Spiller's estimate) this man posted everything from typed flyers to scraps of paper emblazoned 'Phone Block Escort Service', from 42nd St. on down. One of his scrawls contained his tag, written in endless succession on a roll of masking tape, and these were posted ubiquitously along the spine of lower Manhattan. "I call the guy 'Phone Block Escort Service', but that's what he wrote. They're not really signed unless you consider 'G-MEN' a signature, but it's too mysterious to be a signature." Several other small collections have no pseudonym, no tags whatsoever. Spiller just refers to them as 'Zabar's Guy' and 'Canadian Citizenship Guy.'

"But then there's this guy." Spiller flipped over a page in the binder, calling my attention to a series of scrawls, one of which was a Quitclaim Deed dated April 1, 2000. As he continued speaking, his voice turned revelatory. "...KID, his name was KID, I forgot that. I called him ROBBO, because the game I played with him was ROBBO. He was standing in front of MoMA, with a giant cart. He was a mid-town homeless guy, and he had a photocopy machine in his cart, it was like a trailer. So he was standing there, this big, burly, bushy fella – white guy, my age, felt like me. And he said, 'Step right up, step right up, play ROBBO! Only a dollar.' And he had this homemade roulette wheel, or, not roulette, ya know those upright wheels with the pegs that spin and go *tick, tick, tick*. And I thought, this guy's a joke, man, this is funny. I knew he was begging. So as soon as I spun the wheel he goes, 'Look, there's no winning slot.' And this was the game of ROBBO. You couldn't win, it was brilliant. I sat there for half an hour and forked over every single in my wallet." We shared a laugh. "And he had all these deeds, he found them in the mid-town trash. These are real deeds: grantees, address grantees, name, address, grantor. He had a rubber stamp-making machine, and he made this stamp, 'Homeless on Planet Earth.' He was great, and he was standing in front of MoMA. I was going to go to MoMA, but instead I spent half an hour with this guy and went home. I don't need to see stinkin' *Les demoiselles d' Avignon*."

Few scrawlers are as extroverted as "KID", but all of them, no matter what their message, appear to be equally persistent. There's a plain understanding that in order to deliver the message, one must saturate the streets with writing, making it seem as though an army of scrawlers are combing the city with a single message, but alas, it's just one guy.

"Are all the 'Bill Bradley's' the same guy?" I asked Spiller.

"The 'Bill Bradley's' are the same guy. They're on Kleenex box tops or found postcards. I saw this guy on the train once, a middle-aged Asian guy with a long pony-tail, very neatly dressed, and he had a line-up of Sharpies in his pocket. It's all the same handwriting. I don't think anyone is copying this."

When it came time to curate SCRAWL, Spiller admits that he was at a loss. After twenty-plus years of collecting, he has forgotten the order in which he found most things, or the approximate location of where he discovered them. Right off the bat, he knew that they couldn't be displayed chronologically, and that they shouldn't be grouped according to size or even author. Knowing what wouldn't take place was at least a start. "I haven't even read all this stuff," he said to me. "Some of it is impossible to read." He chuckled to himself as he continued flipping through the binder, in search of something he called 'Jehovah's Witness.' After a minute of searching, he found it. "Like this here. I just haven't read this whole thing. It gets harrowing to read it." He paused. "As if this stuff is valuable."

The final product at Apexart was a desolate and street-like scene. There was no illusion in place, no mailbox or lamp-posts that would have given SCRAWL the strange feel of a minimalist off-off-Broadway production. It was evident that Spiller had countered his guilt for essentially stealing these scrawls in the first place by giving them a home (albeit a temporary one) that would have made their authors proud, assuming they would give a damn.

There was some order, some reason to the way the scrawls were hung on the walls, but like him trying to recall where this scrawl was found or when that scrawl was found, Spiller couldn't recall what that reason or order was. It just wasn't all that important. SCRAWL's lasting profoundness is in its ineffability. The Underground Man says, "I do not want to be restricted in any way in the editing of my notes. I don't want to introduce any system or order. I'll note down whatever I remember." This leads me to wonder what variety of scrawl once lay to waste on the streets of St. Petersburg.

Spiller continued to run his hands over a few pages in the binder, as if conjuring the images of SCRAWL's evolution. He fondly recalled a comment made by a fan of the show, who said that some pieces "vibrated" on the walls, almost like they were experiencing an epileptic fit. His mind wandered back to when he was still laying out all the different scrawls for the show, laboring long and hard over where each would go. The memory of this caused him to reflect. "Who's nuts," he asked, "the person who did this, or me, spending half an hour of my life taking it out so I can preserve some pattern?"

All *Notes from the Underground* passages were excerpted from the following edition:

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground & The Gambler*, (Oxford World's Classics, New York), 1991. Translated by Jane Kentish.

To view Apexart's gallery of SCRAWL images, click [here](#)

Justin Wolf will be graduating in January '09 with a Master's in Liberal Studies, and not a moment too soon, what with today's job market clamoring for folks who are well versed in the liberal arts. He has been with canon since the fall of '07, when he and former co-editor Suzanne Farrell converted the magazine from print to an online forum. Justin has plans to pursue a Ph.D in the History of American education, with a focus on the reformer and Transcendentalist A. Bronson Alcott. Above all, Justin wishes to thank the following people at the NSSR who have helped him in countless ways to become a better writer and editor - Suzanne Farrell, Professor Jed Perl, and Professor Melissa Monroe.