



Activists Are Projecting Digital "Calligraffiti" Onto Walls in Berlin

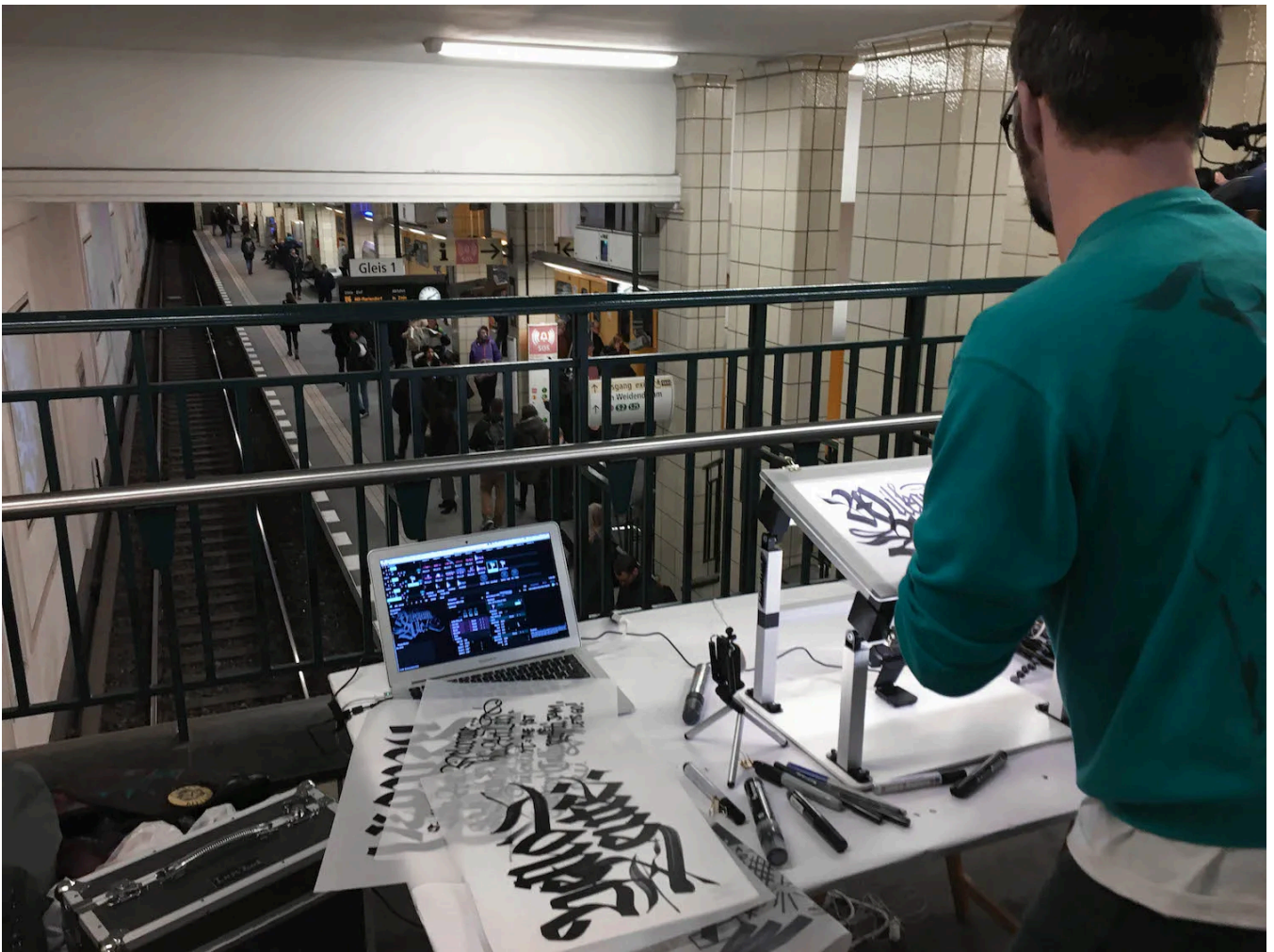
By DJ Pangburn

March 9, 2017, 11:27am

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One unintended side effect of the Arab Spring was the development and spread of calligraffiti, an art form combining traditional calligraphy with graffiti. In yet another unlikely symbiosis, calligraffitos are now fusing it with new media to render "digital calligraffiti," which is projected onto the sides of structures. In Berlin, a number of refugees have been working with the medium as part of a community project organized by Public Art Lab, which culminated during this year's Transmediale festival with Digital Calligraffiti. The idea being to transform "urban screens"—subways, building exteriors, and more—into communication platforms for citizens with migration backgrounds.

During the campaign, refugees and migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Senegal, amongst other countries, spread their message across Berlin. Written primarily in Arabic and German, messages ranged from calls for freedom of speech to "love not war," "art is love," and "no violence." There were also more complex and provocative phrases like, "It's amazing to take pictures in the street without being stopped by police."



Drury live in the Berlin subway. Photo by Michael Ang.

In addition to the Berlin subway installation and the creative session at Collegium Hungaricum, Public Art Lab projected digital calligraffiti messages at Wau Café, inside the cultural center Hebbel am Ufer (HAU), and at the University Marseille during the launch event of the European **Project FutureDivercities** (part of Chroniques Festival). In total, 24 pieces of artwork were produced and displayed on 12 screens across Berlin.

As Public Art Lab's Virna Diane tells *Creators*, *Digital Calligraffiti's* origins go back to 2008, when **Evan Roth** (co-founder of Graffiti Research Lab) presented looping black-and-white graffiti tags at the first **Media Facades Festival** in Berlin, organized and curated by Public Art Lab's Susa Pop. Later, while in Ramallah, Palestine, Pop met Hamza Abu Ayyash, a calligraffiti artist and member of the **Calligraffiti Ambassadors Network**. Hamza showed his work to Susa, and then began thinking of how calligraffiti could work for screens,

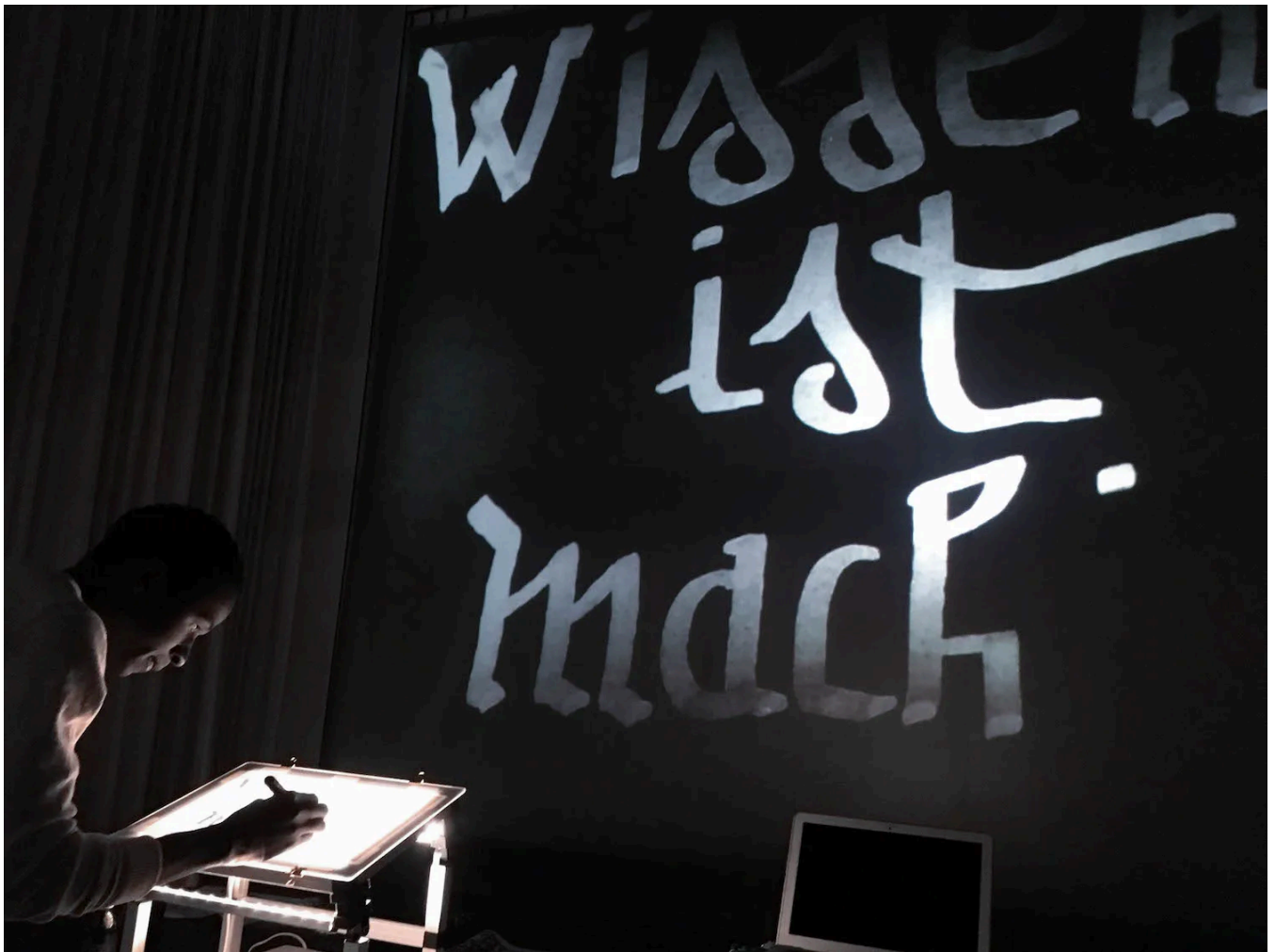
especially in a time when refugees needed a voice and a platform to share their values.



Hamza live in the Berlin subway. Photo by Michael Ang.

And as part of last year's UNESCO International Year of Light, Michael Ang, a.k.a., Mang—an artist and frequent Public Art Lab collaborator—unveiled his installation *(We Are) Light Catchers*, which allowed people to add their ambient “light” to the public installation. The work convinced Pop to enlist Mang in helping to realize *Digital Calligraffiti*, which also included the calligraffiti guidance of Friendly (China), Drury Brennan (United States), The Wa (France), José Délano (Chile), Xuli, a.k.a., Jana Federov (Germany), and Pain, a.k.a., Pain Styler (Germany).

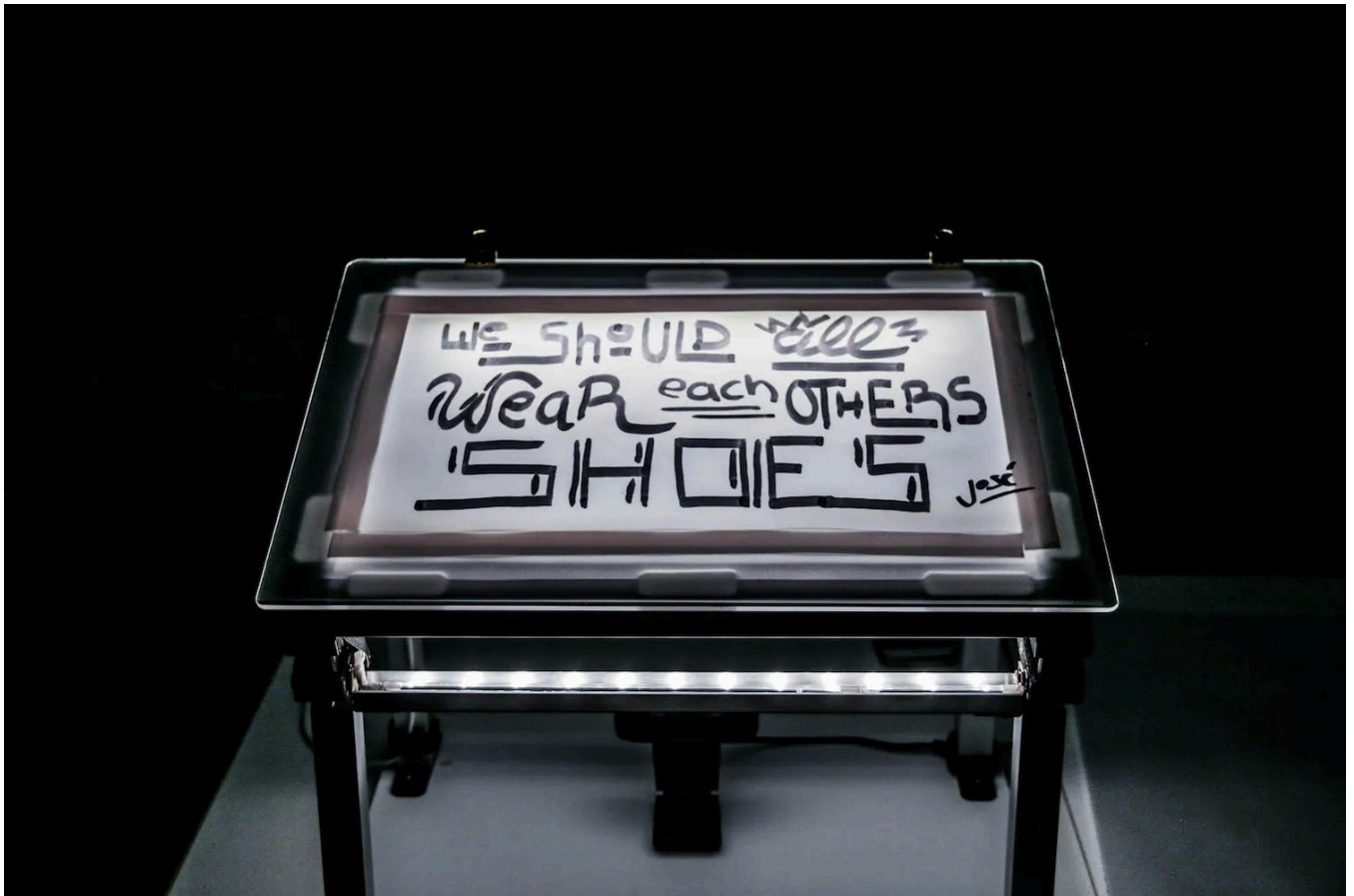
“My contribution, along with Hamza, was to create the system for live projecting the calligraffiti as it's being drawn,” Mang tells Creators. “My challenge was to create a system that could take a centuries old tradition that spans many cultures and recontextualize it into the urban space using current technologies.”



Ahmed writing “Wissen ist Macht (knowledge is power).” Photo by Michael Ang.

Mang feels that humans respond differently to words being drawn than those composed through typeset. For him and many others interested in the tradition, there is an immediate connection or pull that can be felt, where the viewer senses the person behind the calligraphy, even if it is in a different language.

“Projecting the messages in public space gives a voice to the refugees and artists that lets them reach the people in the city,” says Mang. “When you see words drawn in different languages and styles (Arabic, Chinese, and German) while simultaneously feeling the person behind them, you start to feel some of the shared connections between cultures.”



The Infi3ctor.

To create the system, Mang met with calligraphers to observe their techniques. He quickly realized the system would have to allow calligraphers to use tools they are familiar with.

With this in mind, Mang worked with Hamza to create **The Infl3ctor**, a light table that captures the calligraphy as it's being written on tracing paper. The artist draws on the tracing paper with their usual tools (marker, paint, etc.) as it is being shot from below. Image processing inverts the black writing into white for projection, thus "tagging" a surface.



"The act of drawing on paper becomes the act of tagging with light in the urban space, at the scale of buildings," says Mang. "There's no interface to learn, you just draw on the paper."

"On the technical side we have everything dialed in to capture and project the dynamics and texture of each stroke," he adds. "This paid off when Xuli came to the Infl3ctor with paint and a metal blade. As she was painting *Lost and Found*, the paper started to curl from the heavy paint and all that glorious texture was projected. By capturing the process of drawing from the bottom of the page we're presenting a view that most people have never seen."



Diane says that *Digital Calligraffiti* also functions as an integration space for the refugee and migrant populations. Public Art Lab organized a series of events for young refugees with the help of their mediators, Jeanne Mazloum and Nassima Chariet. These events included an introduction to the to the Berlin street art scene with a guide; a t-shirt printing initiation in a Fablab (Happy Lab); and a visit to the creative technologies studio Spektrum.

The refugee response was overwhelmingly positive, according to Mang. Because of the frequent meetings, he could see that they really felt part of the project, especially when they saw their words projected on buildings and in subways.



Naguib writing in Marseille (white) over Berlin (blue). Photo by Michael Ang.

“Refugees and migration are obviously a big and often divisive topic,” says Mang. “My hope was to create something that would help to re-humanize this

group of people.”

“Some of the messages were surprising in their simplicity,” he adds. “When asked about his hopes and dreams one participant wrote, ‘I want to be a dentist.’ That really brought it back to a human level for me—it’s a simple dream, and I hope he gets his chance!”

[Click here](#) for more information on Public Art Lab’s *Digital Calligraffiti* project.

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