

# Chicago Antisocial

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Graffiti artist StefOne, Cooperative Image Group headquarters, the Wicker Park Axe ad defaced again

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## The New Longer-Lasting Axe Effect

More funny business at the corner of Milwaukee and Honore—and then some

By Liz Armstrong

Last Saturday just before dusk, I was outside a Humboldt Park apartment building watching graffiti artists Flash, Chumbly, and StefOne and a couple others paint a wall with huge bright flowers. A passing cop car slowed down for a few seconds, then continued on its merry way.

There's something to be said for using daylight as diversion, but that's not what was going on here. The building, on the 2600 block of West Evergreen, is the new headquarters for Cooperative Image Group, a nonprofit arts education collective for kids. Cooperative Image's projects include maintaining a community garden on North Campbell, running a T-shirt business, covering boarded-up buildings with artwork by elementary and high school students, and giving muralists materials to create large-scale works on privately owned buildings.

Cooperative Image gets permission from the building owners, says executive director Mike Bancroft, but thanks to Mayor Daley's Graffiti Blasters they still find much of their work erased. His group is just trying to beautify the neighborhoods, he says, but "there's always an assumption that

there's a crime being committed."

Streets and Sanitation spokesman Matt Smith says the city's antigraffiti program doesn't differentiate among painted signs, murals, and tags. "Graffiti is graffiti," he says. "We're gonna take it down wherever we can." He says the only way something stays up is if a building owner sends written notice to the city explaining why it should. Otherwise the Graffiti Blasters buff it out or paint over it. But they seem to be a little more forgiving if the graffiti is selling something.

Two weeks ago I wrote about a graffiti-style ad for Axe body spray painted on a boarded-up building at the corner of Honore and Milwaukee, which Ed Marszewski, Elisa Harkins, and one of their friends had painted over. The owner of the building, Michael Black, threatened to press charges against them—a threat he's since rescinded.

New York City's Wooster Collective, which hosts a street-art Web site, got wind of the story; though the site rarely does social commentary, the group's founder, Marc Schiller, posted a long rant about advertisers incorporating street art. "As more ad campaigns begin to co-opt graf and street art in the ads

themselves," read the home page of the site last week, "more graf writers are finding themselves in a bizarre situation—they're now working on projects that co-opt the very same shit they get arrested for. . . . But what's so fucking hypocritical is that when the graf is paid for—when it's an 'ad' and no longer an original piece of art, it's suddenly okay. It's accepted. But it's the same shit! Only not as good."

The advertising-gossip site adrants.com referenced Wooster's version of the story, then the culture-crit magazine *Stay Free!* blogged about the action. The Conversation, a message board hosted by Marszewski's *Lumpen* site, and Harkins's blog filled with comments from readers. Discussions about private property, advertising, art, and underground-culture commodification gave way to insults—my favorite was posted on the Conversation by someone claiming to be an "actual graffiti artist" whose culture doesn't need defending from "art f\*gs" like Marszewski. "Frankly," the poster wrote, "you guys are just a bunch of pussies with too much time on your hands."

"Besides a throng of insults," Marszewski says, "people are threatening to kick my ass and

hating on my events." The week after the story ran, friends of friends delivered messages to him from the artist who'd painted the ad—who still hasn't identified himself to Marszewski or me—telling him to watch his back. At a robot-themed party at Buddy, a space Marszewski runs, last weekend some graffiti-writer kids showed up to confront him. "I tried to explain to them the irony of a graffiti guy wanting to throw me in jail," he says. "We all agreed it was a complex issue, but there was one kid who was like, 'Fuck you, I just want to hate on your ass.'" Later the kids went over to the adjoining Heaven gallery and tagged a wall outside.

The Axe ad was repainted a week and a half after Marszewski's crew covered it up. Then someone—both Marszewski and Black say they don't know who—wrote OFF LIMITS in big silver letters on top of it. The artist soon painted over that message.

When the ad went back up I called the city's graffiti hotline (312-744-1234) to report it, just to see what they'd do. Streets and San said they'd take care of it immediately. But when the Graffiti Blasters came through the neighborhood the next day, they blasted a tag on the very same wall but didn't touch the

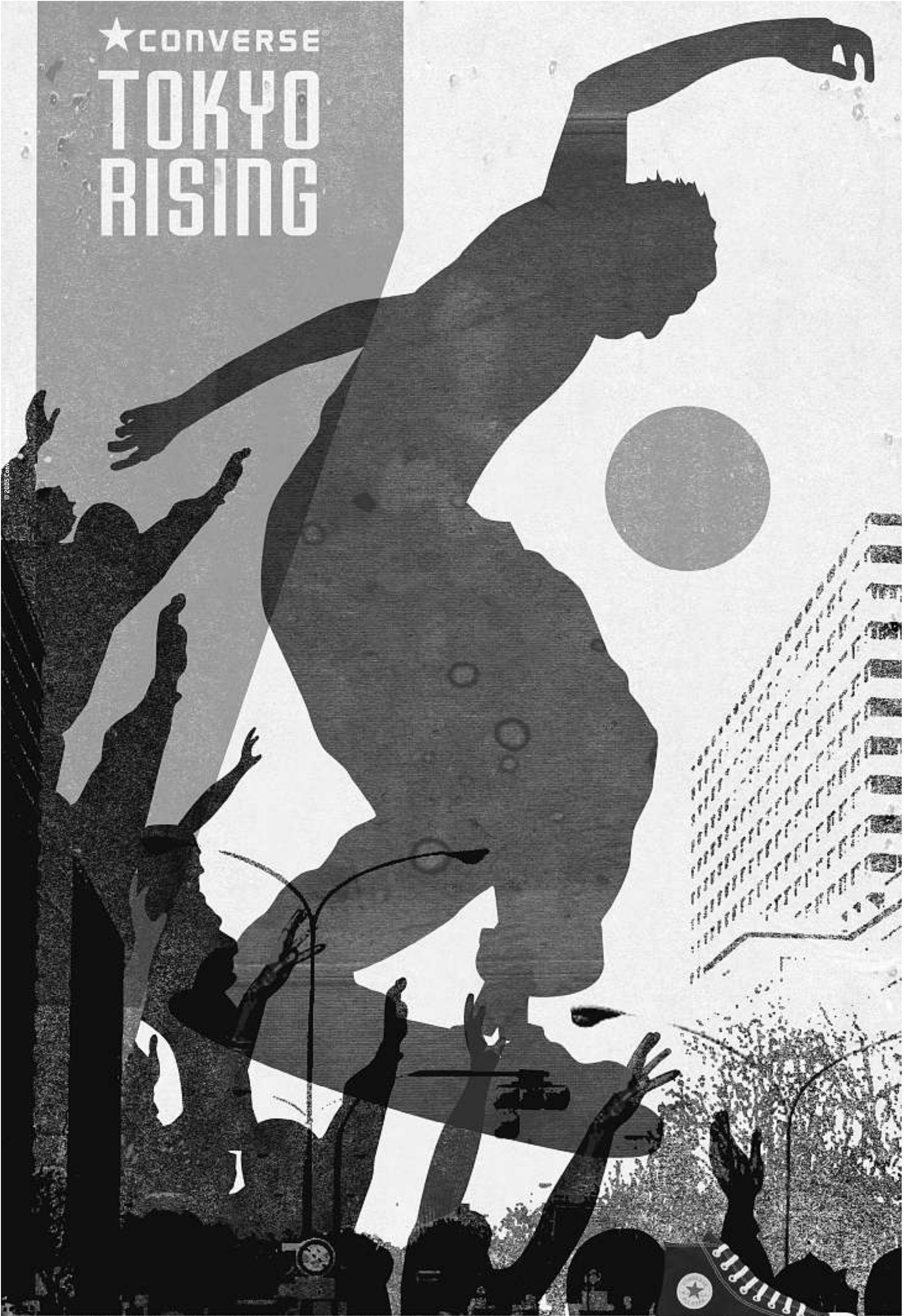
ad. They didn't even leave notice that they wanted to remove the piece, says Black, who hasn't notified the city that he wants the ad to stay up.

Around the same time the Axe ad went back up, Black says, someone involved with an arts program in Portland, Oregon, contacted him about replacing it with a large-scale anticapitalist painting. Black told the guy sorry, that space is taken until Labor Day—how 'bout the two panels in front of the building? But the guy insisted on that space, offering to buy out the Axe contract.

Black says he hasn't seen a cent from Critical Massive yet. He won't say how much he's supposed to get. He also says he's turned down offers from other ad agencies. "People want that side so much," he says. "They're trying to capitalize on the uproar about that corner. I don't want a whole political debate about this, but now I have to think, Who's gonna attack this? I've gotten death threats because of this. I understand what Ed and his friends are trying to do; I just think they're going about it the wrong way. If they're going to keep pursuing my building and the artist, I'm gonna show them how much of an asshole I can be." ■

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