WADE GUYTON

It's amazing that you can become one of the leading artists of your generation by messing with the limits of a home-office printer. That's what 37-year-old artist Wade Guyton has managed to do ink-wise in the past decade.Guyton's early "drawings," from around 2003, when he started incorporating a desktop printer, are filled with striking black Xs over ripped-out sheets from '60s design books and interior catalogues. The color black and the letter x became signature motifs. So did flames (even an ongoing black-markered series of *Firestarter* book covers), the letter u, MarcelBreuer chairs (he twisted a few into disfigured metal sculptures), circles, and lined grids. At some point, Guyton jumped from paper to linen, running—or rather, pulling—gigantic swathes of fabric through the ink-jet printer while it reads from a computer file. Guyton lets the printer cause the aberrations and pattern glitches that run across his muddy canvas. He's a longtime collaborator with friend and fellow artist Kelley Walker. As GuytonWalker, they've utilized Guyton's skill for printer practices with Walker's screen-printing and color techniques. This summer, the team is in charge of filling the first room of the Daniel Birnbaum-curated Pallazo delle Esposizioni at the Venice Biennale. They've printed scanned bananas and SoCal beach colors on canvases and slabs of drywall. Photographer and longtime friend David Armstrong went to Guyton's Midtown studio for this interview, where they spoke about art and Guyton's fallback trade: the mass extermination of chipmunks.

DAVID ARMSTRONG: It's weird to think that I've known you for 10 years. That makes me feel *so* ancient. You came to New York in 1996, and I had already been here for 20 years at that point. Did you come from Tennessee knowing that you wanted to be an artist?

WADE GUYTON: I moved to New York to go to Hunter for art school, so art was in the plans.

ARMSTRONG: You came fresh from the South with dyed-green hair . . .

GUYTON: Yeah, I did. But I think I'd gotten rid of the green by then. And I didn't really finish at Hunter. I was there for about two years and had taken most of the classes I needed—Robert Morris was one of my teachers. I won't say I dropped out—I just didn't finish.

ARMSTRONG: And then I know that you worked at Dia [Center for the Arts] for a while.

GUYTON: That was my first job in New York. I was a guard.

ARMSTRONG: Was that a strategic thing? You know, Donald Baechler worked there for years.

GUYTON: I didn't even know what Dia was when I moved to New York. I think I got the job through artist Lucky DeBellevue. I stood around all day guarding art . . . until the end, when I worked my way up to Dan Graham's café on the roof.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, Donald did that too. That's where he met everyone in the art world.

GUYTON: I met tons of people there. Lots of artists worked grunt jobs at Dia: Meredyth Sparks, Nate Lowman, Lizzi Bougatsos, Marlo Pascual, Rich Aldrich. Oh, and I met Seth [Price] and Bettina [Funcke] there too. Seth and I used to sit up in the café or pick videos from the collection to watch.

ARMSTRONG: You guys were sitting up there talking about Marxism and Hegelian dialectics.

GUYTON: Marxism, experimental film, post-capitalist production . . .

ARMSTRONG: Free love?

GUYTON: Of course. And how to become an artist.

ARMSTRONG: That was the beginning of a whole new generation of artists in New York. It's always interesting seeing all of that hope and excitement, the brave new word—new to them. But when you've been here to witness three generations of it go by . . .

GUYTON: I had no idea what to expect moving here. It's embarrassing to say, but I didn't even realize that people bought contemporary art . . . that people actually paid for it

ARMSTRONG: You didn't?

GUYTON: I know that's really dumb. I was really naïve. I had no idea artists made money.

ARMSTRONG: When I came here in '77, I wasn't aware, first of all, that the city was going bankrupt. I didn't think about things like that because it was all just really fun. That leads into what I wanted to ask you: When you think of all the excess of the '80s art world, can you compare it to the kind of excess that had been going on since 2000?

GUYTON: I don't know what it was like in the '80s. I don't really even know what it was like in the '90s, because I was broke and wasn't selling any art. I was in a few group shows, but I didn't have a gallery until 2006.

ARMSTRONG: Jeez. It's fantastic that you've done so well in such a short time. The '90s was the drop off. When Matthew [Marks] opened his gallery in Chelsea in 1994, it was supposed to be a reaction to the economic decline. Matthew's gallery was supposed to have a mixed stable of young and well-known artists. Well, what he really wanted was American painters . . . So which art genre do you think is the most highly evolved?

GUYTON: I'm not sure.

ARMSTRONG: I was going to say reality TV.

GUYTON: I kind of like *The Amazing Race*. Actually I don't get into reality television. I'm more into *Lost*.

ARMSTRONG: I think we could talk about *Lost* for hours. Didn't we watch a whole season up at my house in Bovina [upstate New York]? God, do you remember the chipmunk epidemic I had up there the December before last?

GUYTON: We should talk about our chipmunk-killing spree.

ARMSTRONG: The chipmunks had just gotten outrageous. They were everywhere. They took over the whole house. I was putting things in containers, and finally I put a lot of our food in that fake stagecoach case I have. When I came down in the morning, the first thing you said was, "The chipmunks got through to the food." I said, "Okay, this is war." [*Guyton laughs*] Plus, they'd eaten a carton of cigarettes. I mean . . . So you got on the Internet.

GUYTON: The Internet has a lot of solutions. I found an insane way to trap chipmunks—it was too crazy not to try. You get a five-gallon bucket, fill it halfway with water, and then you pour sunflower seeds over the water's surface. Then you take a two-by-four and incline it from the ground to the bucket rim. You sprinkle a few more sunflower seeds along the wood beam. As the chipmunks eat the seeds, they walk up the plank to the rim, and they think they see a huge bucket full of sunflower seeds and dive in.

ARMSTRONG: And drown! None of us thought your plan was going to work. And then I was left alone for a whole week with some buckets to carry out the operation. I liked to mix Toll House chocolate chips with the sunflower seeds going up the wood beam.

GUYTON: You were really seducing them.

ARMSTRONG: I thought it was completely ridiculous. Then I went into the kitchen and looked under the table and saw something floating. I lugged the bucket out into the mudroom and dumped it. There were like seven chipmunks in there. They looked like rats because their tails were flattened out. Then I dumped the other buckets and, in just that harvest, there were about 19 dead chipmunks. It was great. I did feel a little guilty, though, when I was upstairs and looked out the window at the stone wall next to the smokehouse and saw the live chipmunks walking around where I had dumped the bodies. I could imagine them identifying their husbands and sons . . .

GUYTON: It was a real massacre.

ARMSTRONG: But after a few rounds they stayed away from the house. Anyway, we should get back to art. When you were back in Tennessee, what artists were you following?

GUYTON: I'm always afraid of these questions because the answers sound so important. But I remember looking at Sherrie Levine's and Richard Prince's work. I didn't have access to very much. We'd get *Artforum*. And I really liked Felix Gonzalez-Torres. That's why it was so exciting to borrow that piece of his with the go-go dancer for the Hammer Museum in L.A. Do you know about that?

ARMSTRONG: No.

GUYTON: Gary Garrels asked six supposedly "abstract painters" to curate a room of works in the Hammer last year around our influences. One of the pieces I picked was *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, which I had never seen in real life before. It's a raised platform surrounded with lights, and each day Gonzalez-Torres had a go-go dancer dance on it for five minutes. I actually had to recast a dancer when I was in L.A. installing for the show. I found him at a bar in Silverlake, and he danced with headphones on in a room hung with my choices: Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Isa Genzken, and Martin Barré. It was a strange and sexy room, but also melancholic. I imagined all the other works waiting around all day for Falk—that was the dancer—to come out and dance for them. I think that piece is originally from 1991. Did you ever see it?

ARMSTRONG: I didn't. But I know so many people feel like you do about Gonzalez-Torres. I wonder if it's because he didn't really get a chance to mature . . . I remember everyone talking about him at the time. But I kind of put him into the category of AIDs art, which I found terribly uninteresting. The best stuff I ever saw of that kind of stuff was Frank Moore.

GUYTON: I don't really think about Gonzalez-Torres's work that way. But I wasn't living here during that time either. I think as a student I ended up liking so many different and conflicting things—even stupid things I don't like now. I won't mention any names on that side.

ARMSTRONG: Unless it's an *All About Eve* kind of interview. Addison DeWitt . . . "a mass of music and fire" . . . How do you feel about the whole Chelsea scene now?

GUYTON: I don't really feel like I'm in it. When I was younger and was working as a Dia guard I would go to see everything. I went to every opening. I was really interested in seeing and learning as much as I could. But now I don't as much. I'm busier. I spend most of my days and nights in the studio. And I watch *Lost*.

ARMSTRONG: I've never understood how all of these people who go out all the time actually manage to make anything.

GUYTON: I miss shows a lot in New York. I see more when I'm out of town. Like in Baden-Baden [Germany]. I saw a great Stephen Prina

show there. He's someone I find very interesting.

ARMSTRONG: What about who you were inspired by as a kid?

GUYTON: I hated art as a kid. I didn't even like art class. I didn't like to draw. I would make my dad do all the drawings because I hated it so much. Once I won a contest—or rather, he did. The drawing was really good, and I thought I was going to get caught because it was selected for some bigger show outside of school. The teachers wanted the same drawings, but for us to redo them on bigger paper. I thought, "Oh, shit. They're going to make me do the drawing in front of them, and I have no idea how." Luckily, that didn't happen.

ARMSTRONG: That's so funny that you hated to draw.

GUYTON: That's why I don't draw now and why I use the printer. [*laughs*] That's how it started. I was trying to do these stupid marker drawings, something hard-edged and geometric, and I got so bored. It was too much work. I could just type the same thing into the computer, and the printer did a much better job.

ARMSTRONG: [*staring at an artwork on top of a shelf*] Is that Al Gore?

GUYTON: Yeah. Jonathan Horowitz made that piece. It's Al Gore when he was really young. He's from Tennessee too, you know. We hated Tipper when we were kids because she led that big crusade against music.

ARMSTRONG: How horrible. So, when did you realize people actually bought contemporary art? [*both laugh*]

GUYTON: I guess when I started realizing what galleries actually do.

ARMSTRONG: Was there any disenchantment on your part when you saw backstage—or, as -Matthew [Marks] calls it, "the killing room." You know, the market-driven part of the whole thing?

GUYTON: I came late to galleries. A lot of people my age started their careers younger, so I was spared seeing that side for a long time.

ARMSTRONG: I think most people who are really super-successful hit it right when you did, in their early to mid-thirties. It can be dangerous if it happens earlier than that. How do you characterize your relationship with your collectors?

GUYTON: There are awful ones and great ones. There are a few I absolutely love, like Andy Stillpass in Cincinnati. He's one of the greatest collectors in the world because his relationship to the art is alive. He lives with it. He commissions all of his pieces. He doesn't have tons of money, but he's really smart. Then there are other collectors who—

ARMSTRONG: Who see better with their ears than their eyes. But I know there is actually a waiting list to get work by you.

GUYTON: I'm not sure about that.

ARMSTRONG: Come on . . . I know for a fact there is a waiting list. I tried to get on it, but it was so long, I just said forget it. [*Guyton laughs*] But our mutual friend James [Oakley] had a GuytonWalker print he got for his birthday, and he left it in my house in Brooklyn. In case you were wondering where the work went . . .

GUYTON: I thought I saw it being auctioned at Phillips de Pury . . . [*laughs*]

ARMSTRONG: No. I have it. I couldn't figure out where to put it. I'm always rearranging, reinstalling the collection, so to speak. I ended up hanging it in a prominent place, although it is in the kitchen. It's between the two windows, and it's really beautiful there. Someone asked me if it was a Lichtenstein. But I'll tell you, the person who really loves it most, who is like, "Oh, I really like that, Mr. David," is my cleaning lady. She's the only one who has effused about it. I thought that was really genuine.

GUYTON: That's good because they say contemporary art is alienating. But I make art for the people.

ARMSTRONG: Well, I have a lot of people at the house, but they're all fashion idiots, and they don't know what they're talking about.

GUYTON: I thought that piece was pretty chic. It's the GuytonWalker where we took the Fischli & Weiss image of chairs and reworked it.

ARMSTRONG: It's fun, especially in the morning when you're making coffee. How long have you known Kelley, anyway?

GUYTON: Since Tennessee. We were friends in Knoxville. We always helped on each other's works or with installing shows, and at some point we thought it would be fun to make work together. We decided it should be separate from our individual work, even with a different gallery than the ones we were represented by.

ARMSTRONG: What do you think when you see postcards of your work in museums?

GUYTON: I've never seen a postcard of my work in a museum.

ARMSTRONG: Are you sure? There must be some. You just don't go into the gift shops. I only go to the gift shops now—I don't go to the museum. If you've been once, you already know what's there . . . Let's talk about technology, the cyber highway and all that bullshit. You do a lot of screen sucking.

GUYTON: I do a lot of screen sucking? What does that mean?

ARMSTRONG: All forms of watching a screen.

GUYTON: Oh, I guess I do. I'm always looking at the computer. I make all of my work on the computer at some point or another. Almost all of the paintings come from a file. But I actually don't know how to use the computer very well.

ARMSTRONG: Are you kidding? Then how would you classify me? When you said "from a file," I was going to ask what the hell you were talking about. Although I use digital now for my photography, are you aware of that? It's so much better. And when you have a genius printer, you don't even need to go in a darkroom. Great printers are like artists. They do it for you.

GUYTON: I like having other people doing the work, too. I've been printing on all of these weird materials. I've been going to commercial printers who usually do billboards or decals on the sides of trucks. They've been printing on two-by-fours for me and printing on drywall for me and Kelley. I love just giving them the file and letting them go. I even tell them that they can interpret the color however they want. Did you see all of those pictures I e-mailed you of my recent work?

ARMSTRONG: I didn't open them. Was I supposed to? [*Guyton laughs*]

GUYTON: I just thought you hadn't seen any of the recent shows, like my gray show in Belgium. I forgot you're not very good on the computer.

ARMSTRONG: I could have opened them. I can do things like that. But I know your work and how beautiful some of the pieces are. There is a deliberate element of style to them.

GUYTON: Well, art has to be sexy.

ARMSTRONG: You think art needs a hook? That's what Mozart thought—that the work needed a veneer, that it would attract people even if it was a heavy subject. But then again, a lot of lesbian art seems purposely ugly . . . So you've been working a lot for preparation for the Venice Biennale. Doesn't it feel like we're always working? I feel like Martha Stewart without the money. She says: "I only sleep two hours a night." Like, I do too, but I'm still broke.

GUYTON: I don't really live the bohemian life. I come to work in Midtown everyday, along with all the work-a-day folk.

ARMSTRONG: How do you think this bad economy is going to affect young artists?

GUYTON: It seemed to me that a lot of people started going to art school recently because they thought they could be famous and make a lot of money. They might be in for a bad turn. People will still make great art, but I think it's good to assume you will always be a failure. People were believing the opposite.

ARMSTRONG: When I was in art school, we all thought it was a joke that they gave out student loans. We thought, "How is anyone going to pay this back? Are they kidding?"

GUYTON: Being an artist is supposed to be a scam, not a career.

ARMSTRONG: But that's what I mean. A lot of people now seem to have this thing about how they want to be famous. But they don't even know what for . . . like the Octomom. Well, I guess she did do something. Let's talk about the printer now—that's where you make most of your art. Will you show me how it works? [*They walk over to a big printer in the center of the studio.*]

GUYTON: It's an Epson Stylus Pro 9600 with UltraChrome ink.

ARMSTRONG: How much was it?

GUYTON: Well, this we just got on eBay for $900 or $1,000.

ARMSTRONG: You're kidding. So it's not new?

GUYTON: Well, it looks kind of new. It's been gently used.

ARMSTRONG: Can you put anything through it?

GUYTON: I've put everything through it. I have two printers: one that's clean and one that's dirty. If you want to make a nice photo, you use the clean printer. If you want to experiment, we go to this one. I've put fabric through here. Fabric is tricky because it bunches, so you have to trick the printer into thinking that it's printing on something else. Because it has a sensor, it actually can figure out what it's not supposed to be printing on. I use a lot of pre-primed linen.

ARMSTRONG: And the printer has no problem with that?

GUYTON: It does have problems, but I've figured out how to trick the machine. It normally only takes 44 inches, but I'm able to get it to do more with a little folding and tape. I pretty much have to coax it into printing.

ARMSTRONG: Do you ever make additional marks on top of what comes out of the printer?

GUYTON: I never do anything by hand. For the GuytonWalker collaboration, we will screen-print. Kelley was a printmaker, so he's really good at it. He's an expert on color. He's really a much better artist than I am in that way, because he knows how to print and paint.

ARMSTRONG: How do the patterns in your work happen?

GUYTON: The patterns are from where the printer has kind of jammed. The white lines, for example, are from where the ink jet heads are getting clogged up. Basically, for the series of black canvases, the file is the same for each one—a black rectangle.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, I love those diagonal stripes over there.

GUYTON: I found that pattern on a matchbook that I scanned. I found it at my mom's house when I was cleaning everything up.

ARMSTRONG: It's just fantastic. Everyone thought that show you did in 2007 at Petzel was the best solo show of the year. I didn't get a chance to see it. I'm housebound, you know.

GUYTON: The black show at Petzel.

ARMSTRONG: Wasn't there something odd with the floors?

GUYTON: I laid plywood right on top of the concrete floor. Then we painted it all black just like the floor in this studio. When the paintings come out of the printer, they are so big I have to drag them across the floor. They lay on the floor, and the dirt becomes embedded in them and vice versa. Anyway, I wanted to bring the studio into the gallery. If you have a room of 10 black monochromes, you run the risk of having it turn into the Rothko Chapel. It had to have a different feel to it, something more visceral. So we painted the floor. The best part was that at the opening, people's feet were sticking to the floor. That was great—feeling the painting in your feet. And the black floor sucked up all the light.

ARMSTRONG: See, I should have gone. One thing I hate about openings is how bright they are. Another thing I hate is having to see all those *other* people.

GUYTON: Mine was bright. We accentuated the florescents.

ARMSTRONG: What else are you doing?

GUYTON: I started a publishing company. So now I'm a book publisher. And we have one book: Seth Price's *How to Disappear in America*. It's available for $20 from The Leopard Press.

ARMSTRONG: Do I have to buy it?

GUYTON: No, I'll give you one for free. It's already out of print. We sold almost a thousand books.

ARMSTRONG: What's the second book going to be?

GUYTON: The second edition of *How to Disappear in America*. I've got to change the color of the cover.

ARMSTRONG: But then it won't be as valuable as the first printing.

GUYTON: Oh, it will be.

David Armstrong is an acclaimed photographer who lives and works in New York. His work has appeared in French Vogue, Japanese Vogue, and GQ, among others.