

**PRESSBOOK**

JR

*ArtReview*

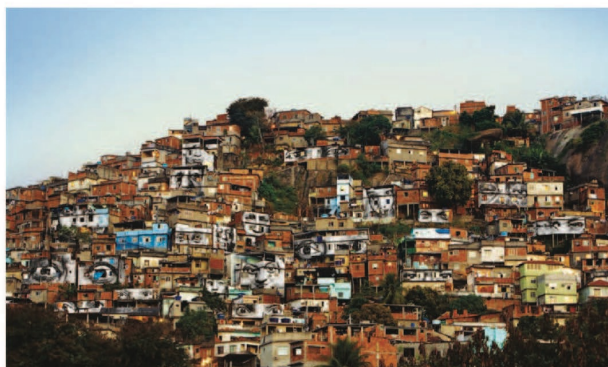
*December 2015*

JR

*Interview by Christopher Mooney*



“I’m not trying to work illegally,  
but sometimes that’s the only option”



Born on the outskirts of Paris, JR started out as a teenage graffiti tagger using the moniker Face 3. After transitioning to photography he began exhibiting his photographs by pasting them on the walls of Paris and its train system. His first large-scale street photopasting project, *Portrait of a Generation*, began in 2004, and since then he has taken his art worldwide, from Rio de Janeiro to Sierra Leone, often responding to social conflicts or disasters. His first solo museum exhibition took place at the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, in 2013, and he has exhibited everywhere from Tate Modern to the Venice Biennale, won a TED prize and produced special issues of the French newspaper *Libération* and *The New York Times Magazine* and films, among the most recent of which is *Les Bosquets* (2015).

**ARTREVIEW** *How did Portrait of a Generation start?*

JR I've worked in a ton of neighbourhoods, but nowhere longer than in Clichy-Montfermeil. It's where I pasted my first enlarged photo, the one of Ladj Ly holding his video camera like a weapon. I did it without authorisation, and the city sued me. I left France for a year because I didn't want to pay the fine. I was nineteen or so. A year later, in 2005, the riots exploded, at exactly that same street corner where the two kids that hid in the substation died and the first car was torched, right in front of that photo – the epicentre of the largest riot in France since the French Revolution. And all over the media, my

photos were in the background. That's when my work really started. People asked me to take photos there for press agencies. What I was doing was 'vandalism', that's what it was called, not 'street art'. But I said, 'No, I want to create images where I control where they're going and how they impact on people. So I want to continue what I was doing in that neighbourhood a year ago, but now I want to get closer to the people there.' I think that's the real beginning for me.

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**AR** *And how has it evolved?*

JR After the riots, the state decided it had to do something radical and rebuild everything, and to do so they had to first destroy everything. So two years ago I pasted those same faces inside buildings, and we filmed their demolition, which revealed the portraits – all of this without

*above* Morro da Providencia favela, Rio de Janeiro, 2008

*facing page* 28 Millimetres, *Portrait of a Generation*, 2011, *Destruction #5, Montfermeil, France*, 2013, colour photograph, matt Plexiglas, aluminium, wood, 179 × 134 cm

authorisation. Which is interesting, because two years ago my work was pretty well recognised in France, but I still couldn't get authorisation.

**AR** *Do you often work without authorisation?*

JR The way I explain it is, I'm not trying to work illegally, but sometimes that's the only option there is to make sure the work makes sense for the people involved. It doesn't mean that I'm going to get arrested for it afterwards, it just means that that's the way it has to happen, in that grey zone.

**AR** *You brought the ballet in for the film without authorisation?*

JR That was possible because the people in that neighbourhood knew the work I'd done for all those years, so they let me bring 100 dancers into the streets where the riot happened, in one of the tensest neighbourhoods there is, and make a film. A lot of the film is shot at night, so we had to ask people to keep their lights on, and we put on loud music outside and built a stage the size of the opera in the middle of their neighbourhood. The city told us – it was the city of Clichy this time, because Les Bosquets had been destroyed – the last time someone tried to make a film, with John Travolta, in 2008, they burned all the cars. 'We'll give you whatever authorisation you want, but it won't matter, you have to talk to the community there.' So we had to go door-to-door to explain it to everybody, to make sure they understood. It was a huge undertaking, weeks and weeks of planning.

AR *Did you have to convince them to do it? Or were they open to it?*

JR There was a lot of convincing, a lot of questioning. They trusted the idea of it as art much more than if it were a feature movie. But they never imagined we would bring the best dancers from the Paris Opera and New York City Ballet. I was afraid that a ballerina in a tutu walking the street there might be problematic, depending on the different religions and stuff that are in that neighbourhood. But there was no problem. A lot of the people had never seen a ballet; it was like two worlds meeting, two completely opposite universes. I got as much enjoyment from the process as from the final result.

AR *Is the film the final work in the project?*

JR Each time I think it's finished, it becomes the beginning of something else. It's confusing, knowing when a project is finished, because it seems to be always a moment where it would make even more sense than before. The funny thing is, last year the French president wanted to know more about this project. I showed him the whole ten years. The film was not done yet, I'd just shot everything but it was not edited yet, so I just went through the rushes with him on the computer and I invited a few people from that neighbourhood to be there. We've talked about process and I said, 'Look, all I'm showing here we've done without authorisation, but it doesn't mean that I'm not proud to show it to you or that I'm reproaching the government or anything, because I think it actually made sense to be done that way for the people there. They're the creators, they decide how it happens, and in that process everyone felt they were part of it.' And now you know, they're building a 'Villa Médicis' annex there – an artist residence centre right in Les Bosquets. I guess that's one of the reasons why he wanted to understand the project – because they don't know how to talk to and involve the community. So we had a really interesting conversation on how things have to happen organically. Nothing can beat that, because a bureaucratic approach, even with good intentions, is difficult in places and communities where there's always been a lack of attention. That's the main statement in the film: 'All we needed was attention; we wanted to exist.' That sums up the film for me, and every place I've ever worked. Not only in poor places, everywhere. Everyone wants attention, dignity, and no matter where I go, I always find that same concern, but it maybe resonates more in people's hearts and heads when it comes from a neighbourhood that we see a lot in the media, not always for good reasons. So, yes, that exchange was really interesting.

AR *Did he ask you to participate in the Villa Médicis?*

JR His office asked if I would get involved. We're talking right now. I told him they should contact Ladj Ly.

AR *Is what you do a form of activism, or is it entirely artistic?*

JR It's an entirely artistic project. I've always hated the word 'political'. Someone once told me that what I do is always political, because I go outside the walls and work in the streets. But my work is not politically driven to push you to vote on one side or another. It raises questions and doesn't give answers. Some people see its social component more than others, but it's up to them to interpret it, and use it. People in the neighbourhood, in Kenya, in Brazil, they've used the work to spread their own fight, but the exact same work presented in another country becomes just art, just a way to discover another community.

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another place. In Brazil, in Liberia, it's taken completely differently. I'm very curious to see how people outside France see this film. In France they get it, they understand what happened, but in other places they'll create parallels, depending on their own story. I've shown it to kids in Chicago who don't even know there were riots in France, but it relates to what they know.

AR *What happens, in your opinion, when you take something like Les Bosquets and convert it into an aesthetic object?*

JR Every image I've pasted there, and the ballet, sparks... incomprehension in people. 'What is it? What does that mean?' I don't know if incomprehension is the right word, but it creates... it raises questions constantly. That's when I know it has hit the right spot. People ask questions because there's nothing written on

the photo, and no one's giving them any answers. For me, the discussions that come from this are the best part of the process. In every country, people just stop and look and don't understand. Then they realise it's for them to figure out, that no one is going to be like, 'That's what you should understand from it.' Their interactions and interpretations are much more interesting than mine. Like, there was the drug-dealer head of the Commando in Brazil, who asked me, very straightforwardly, 'What is the purpose of your project?'

AR *How do you respond to this type of question?*

JR It's super-hard. I say something like, 'Alright, my work does not have a direct purpose, it is meant to bring community together.' In the case of Brazil, I wanted to paste a photograph of a woman in her own community. 'But why do you want to do that?' he asked. I said, 'I think women are the pillars of the community and I want to give a different image of them than what I see in the media, where they're always hidden in the background.' The drug dealer says, 'But what is that going to change?' Really straightforward, and I'm like, 'Actually, maybe nothing.' 'So why are you doing it then?' I say: 'Because I believe that if we all get together and paste it, maybe we'll get seen and maybe people will change their opinion about the place. If they don't, it doesn't matter, we will have left something – just paste and paper, that might not even last until the next rain.'

AR *Your Phaidon book is titled JR: Can Art Change the World? What's the answer?*

JR I guess I don't have a direct answer, but I think a lot of conflict in the world is caused by misperception. Once in Liberia, there was a big crowd watching us paste up images, and someone said, 'I don't know where you're from, or what you do, but I've been listening to the people standing around here discussing this, and no one really knows what this is about. So I think if this is art, then maybe art is about making people not think about their main worries of the day for a moment, and just question what's happening now. I think that's what you guys are trying to do.' I could never have even come up with something like that. I was speechless. And if that's what it meant for him, then definitely it's a complete other frame of reference, and that's the kind of thing I'm curious to know about in different countries, how different people approach these images. So, if you can change people's perception, one image at a time, and create that spark I mentioned earlier, maybe you can change people's perception of the world, and that's a way of changing the world. ar



*above* 28 Millimetres, *Portrait of a Generation, Les Esquets, In the Mist, Montfermeil, France*, 2014, colour photograph, mat: Plexiglas, aluminium, wood, 270 x 180 cm  
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