

**PERROTIN**

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**PRESSBOOK**

JR

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## JR tests the ethical side of the art gallery (an interview)

by Paul Laster - August 9, 2018

*An artist who made it without the help of art galleries and fairs exhibits at Perrotin in New York. What was out is now in. Will its morality resist to the art market?*



View of Perrotin's gallery facade for JR's exhibition 'Horizontal', in New York. © Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin.



Starting out as an artist on the streets of Paris when he was still a teen, over the past two decades JR has risen to international acclaim. After creating public interventions around the world and winning the TED Prize, he began exhibiting his work in galleries and museums. Since that time his reputation for creating socially engaging art has grown exponentially and his work has been featured on the cover of the New York Times Magazine and on CBS' 60 Minutes. Conceptual Fine Arts recently sat down with JR to discuss his works about borders and migration at Perrotin New York, which is his first solo exhibition in the city, and his use of social media and far-reaching projects to attract an audience of millions to his compassionate causes.

Are you a self-taught artist?

*Yes, I started taking my first photos when I was around 17 years old. I didn't know anything about the world of galleries and museums. I wouldn't even call myself an artist at the time because I didn't know that there was such a job as being an artist. But it came naturally because I wanted to learn. I was part of the generation that had seen photography go from an expensive sport to being something that everyone could use. If I had been born 10 years earlier I would have never gotten into photography. I know that because I'm also part of the generation that was able to easily share their work by themselves. It was before social media so I started doing it on the street. I would have never thought of making a book of my work or knocking at the door of a white cube space to show it. Why would I do that when I could display it on the street? I have shared my work in the street since I started.*

Did you invent the concept of a “Sidewalk Gallery” or just adapt it to your work?

*I had never seen it before I did it. That's why I wrote Sidewalk Gallery on the wall, to let people know what it was. When I was doing graffiti it was seen as vandalism, so I wanted to make sure that people understood that it was an exhibition. I would put up my photos and spray paint “Sidewalk Gallery” in a vandalistic way, but it was actually saying it's an art show, if you want to see it that way.*

Is it something that you continue to do?

*Yes, but in a different way. The kid at the border is a kind of sidewalk gallery, but I've adapted it in another way. Early on I was creating the gallery on buildings that were being renovated. Because I was showing small pictures I would have to frame them so people would see it. Now I'm adapting to the architecture, everywhere I go. I started doing that a long time ago. I've basically changed the whole perspective on it, so I don't need to write anything next to it now. People understand that's it's a work of art. Street art is completely democratic. It's a little weird for me to call it street art, because we weren't calling it that way when Basquiat and Haring were doing stuff in the streets. Now it's a popular name for it, but you don't call art in galleries “gallery art”—it's just art.*

Did winning the TED Prize in 2011 change your life and practice?

*It didn't really change my life and practice, but the TED Talks allowed me to share my vision with more people. I was able to make a connection. I would encourage any artist or any person who wants to share his story to do it this way. Suddenly people could understand how every project was related to one another and how it was my journey to discover what it is to be an artist, what it is to share images, what it is to share them with the world, what it is to confront them in different contexts. Because millions of people saw my TED Talks they say, ‘Oh, I know your work.’ They also know what my work means, while before that they would say you're doing black and white photography, without connecting it to the context.*

What is the Inside Out project, which you created with the TED Prize, and how is it continuing to develop?

*When you win the TED Prize you have to create a project. I created Inside Out and put all of the money into it. The idea is that anyone who wants to express himself can send me his photo and I will print it for free and send it back to him at a jumbo scale, anywhere in the world. That person can then post his face to the people of his community to express whatever he wants to defend. When I started it in 2011 it was the time of the Arab Spring and I began receiving hundreds of portraits from Tunisia, and I sent the big pictures back. The people there replaced all of the official portraits of the dictator with their photos. At the same time there was a school in Brooklyn that pasted photos of all of the different races of children in the school yard to show that these kids have beautiful faces. The same technique was used in different contexts around the world. Now, my studio has sent more than 380,000 posters to about 130 countries around the world. It's still going with the exact same technique, the exact same rule—you cannot have any message on it. It expresses different things, depending on where it is. In Afghanistan or Korea, it can mean something completely different.*

How did you develop this social concern?

*I don't think I ever really developed it. It was always there from day one. Maybe also because I didn't know the word political. When I paste in the street it's political in itself, but for my generation I guess to be political means you have to choose one side—to be left wing or right wing—so I was always confused with that. Someone explained one day that the fact that you decide to be out on any wall in the street is already political in itself, but the context can make it even more political. It could have a different meaning. I pasted really early in the suburbs of Paris and when the riots exploded I began to understand that a photo of my friend holding a video camera like a weapon can take on another meaning. At that time the media was portraying the riots on television and I understood the whole duality. It put me in a situation where I discovered myself as an artist. I had to take a position—and I kept it.*

Is street art more socially engaged than fine art?

*I don't think so because for me, as I said, I don't separate them—it's all art. I think art reflects things within us, within one another. Some people decide to reflect things that are more personal, while others decide to express something more abstract, which might reveal something in*

*you, but not in me. What I do is visual. It's photography, so it might touch more people in this way, but it doesn't mean that it's more political than any other work.*

What are you presenting in the Perrotin show, which is your biggest gallery presentation in New York, thus far?

*I decided to focus on borders—the project that I did on the border between the United States and Mexico a few months ago, and the boats and trains that I have pasted on a they passed through the world. Through those stories I'm kind of talking about how people wish for the same thing on either side. I'm doing this with living proof, visual proof. It's not just words, it's actions. My work has always been about action. It's a reality that we are discussing as we look at it happening. It raises more question than it gives answers. OK, well, how did they let that happen? I'm also wondering that question. Art has always inspired me to ask these questions, not to give answers, and this show follows that line.*

Are you making models or interpretations of your best known public art projects within this show, as well?

*Yes, because all of my work is ephemeral. This is a way to make it more permanent.*

These types of artworks remind me of the work of Christo. Is it true, that like Christo, you fund your own projects?

*Exactly. Christo is the only artist whom I can think of that works like I do. I went with him when he did The Floating Piers project in Italy and he showed me around. It was done at such a grand scale. It cost €12 million to create and he did it independently. I was amazed! It inspired me to think bigger, because it is possible. In this moment, when most of the shows are financed with brands and a lot of the artists are working with corporations, it gives me hope to look at him still holding that line. I've never moved from mine and I don't intend to do it.*

But you do do collaborations, such as the ones you've done with Arcade Fire or Pharrell Williams, right?

*Yes, with artists always. I've always done those kinds of collaborations. I love working with other artists.*

A lot of street and graffiti artists start out with a signature tag or image, are the eyes and faces your signature marks?

*I never thought of it this way, because my signature is JR, but I guess these things become that way. I didn't invent black and white photography or pasting images, but by doing it over and over it has become a way that people recognize my work, even without me signing it. When I travel to other countries, where nobody knows my work, they just see these black and white images and never know who created them. In New York and Paris or other cities people might say I've seen that somewhere before, is that the artist that..., but in other places they take it for what it is, not for who did it.*

Like the giant eyes on the rooftop of a building that's visible from the terrace of the Whitney Museum in Lower Manhattan?

*Exactly, those were the eyes of someone who never made it to the United States. It's one of the rare photos that we made and didn't send back. Instead we brought them to New York.*

What do you look for when you go to a new place? Like in your film Faces Places, where you travel to a new place—maybe a place that Agnes Varda suggests—or when you're traveling for a show, what do you look for as a place for an intervention?

*I look for people. I always come to a place naively and I talk to people so that I can understand the context. I try to find a project that I can create with them. That's what we did in Faces Places, somewhat on a smaller scale, but that's what we did—come to a village, check it out, find a wall, talk to people and find out what they want to share and work in a way that reflects the history of the people. I'm doing that on a larger scale in other places, in bigger cities, but Agnes Varda wanted to take me to small villages, and that's how we did it.*

But still you had to find the best spots—for example, on the water tower—that would be visible from a distance, right?

*Yes, some of the work is visible from a distance, but if you look at my project for Ellis Island the installations are actually invisible to most people. When I pasted them I knew that would be the case, but because of requests the officials for Ellis Island decided to open it more often so that people could come and see it. There's a limited number of people who can view it now, but the people who do see it will never forget it.*

How do you use social media? How does it extend your practice?

*Even before social media, I would post a photo a day on my website. When social media came along I was kind of late—I have to say—but I caught up quickly. I started using it to share the locations of my work and also to show the process. I'm able to give the exact place on the map for a lot of the projects—like the installation of the baby, Kikito, at the US/Mexico border—where I made work that I wanted to share so that people could come and see it. Without social media it would be difficult to share that information.*

What about that baby? What motivated you to go to the Mexican-American border to make this work?

*I did a project in Rio last year with a technique that I discovered in North Korea a couple of years ago, where they use scaffolding. I thought wow, I won't have to depend on walls anymore, plus there's more opportunity for play in the city or with the location itself. I never know how it will work, but we jump in to see if we can make it happen. I was hearing about the wall everyday on television and thought maybe we could do something there. We scouted a location on the border, where I knew that I couldn't paste on the wall itself. We found a spot in Mexico where there was a road to access it and view it from the American side and then I went to see what was on the Mexican side. I knocked on peoples' doors and at the house closest to the wall a woman answered and said—to my surprise—that she was following me on Facebook. The whole time that we were talking there was a little kid looking at me. I saw an empty spot near the house that was also by the wall, but kept scouting for other locations. I started thinking about this kid in that house looking at the border all day. What does it mean to him? We went back and I photographed the baby boy and then made some sketches, and then his mother gave us permission to use his portrait. We rented a bulldozer to level the ground, which took about 30 days, and built the scaffolding three times the size of the wall. No one said anything so we pasted the picture on the scaffolding in a day. As soon as I posted a photograph on Instagram the image went viral around the world.*

Why the picnic, with the eyes connecting the two sides of the border?

*Like with any art exhibition you need a finissage, a closing party. We went back to the site and built a table on the Mexican side and planned one for the American side, but when we asked the border patrol for permission they said if you do that we will arrest everyone and deport anyone who's not legally in the United States. We decided to go ahead without permission. We made table cloths with two giant eyes, one on each side, and after the border patrol passed we laid them out on both sides and handed food and drink through the wall from the Mexican side. We had a band, with half of the musicians in Mexico and half on the American side. After two hours, a border patrolman stopped and, remarkably, he and I shared a cup of tea, without him shutting down the event.*

Whose eyes were on the photograph that was used for the tablecloths?

*They were the eyes of a DACA dreamer, whom we photographed just days before the picnic. She actually came for the picnic with her mother, even though they were in danger of being detained and possibly deported.*

Your 2015 Phaidon monograph is titled Can Art Change the World? What is your answer to that question now?

*My answer is different. I think we can change the perception that we have about the world, and if you are changing the perception someone has about the world, that can actually change the world. We change the perception of the world by questioning it—by asking questions we're able to push the boundaries.*