

**JR**

*JR's Street Gallery Comes Indoors*

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## JR’s Street Gallery Comes Indoors

At the Brooklyn Museum, his pictures skim the surface of social problems. It can be a frustratingly reductive vision of world peace. “I think being naïve is what has helped me the most,” he says.



JR with a new composite artwork, “The Chronicles of New York City,” at the Brooklyn Museum. He is often categorized as a street artist, but he said his abiding interest is people, and connecting them. Credit...Pari Dukovic for The New York Times

**By Max Lakin**

On a fall day at the Brooklyn Museum, it was hard for JR, the most recognizable anonymous artist in the world, to go more than a few steps without a wave of double takes and a trail of enthusiastic fans.

JR, who is 36 and was born in France, has been in the public sphere for at least a decade, yet still declines to give his full name and insists on appearing in public in a fedora and semi-rimless sunglasses, a bit of schtick that can make him look like he’s

stepped directly out of a Godard film. This persona, combined with his work — monumental public photography projects often made in parts of the world wrenched by political strife or made inaccessible by military conflict — has lent JR the aura of an empathetic Houdini, magicking himself into unkind places and performing the dual trick of not getting killed while stirring warm feelings.

["JR: Chronicles,"](#) his largest solo museum exhibition to date, tracks his by now well-documented actions from the Gaza Strip and the slums of Southern Sudan and Sierra Leone, to more recent work in the United States. Because his art is centered on portraiture and involves wheat-pasting oversize prints on building exteriors — the faces of women in Rio's favelas splashed across their homes, or disembodied eyes in Havana, Istanbul and Los Angeles — JR is usually categorized as a photographer or a street artist, but neither really gets at his abiding interest, which is people, and connecting them.

"I don't really like the term 'street art,'" he said as we walked through the exhibition. "My studio was the street for a lot of years, just because I had to install my work anywhere I could, and I didn't know anything else. For me it's art whether it's inside or outside. Sometimes it doesn't work in a gallery. "

JR doesn't give away much about his past, aside from saying his parents emigrated from Tunisia and Eastern Europe and that he grew up in one of the "stable" banlieues outside Paris. When he was a teenager he would travel into the city center to write graffiti, using the tag JR, his real initials, or FACE 3, from his short-lived career as a D.J., until he realized he wasn't good at either pursuit.

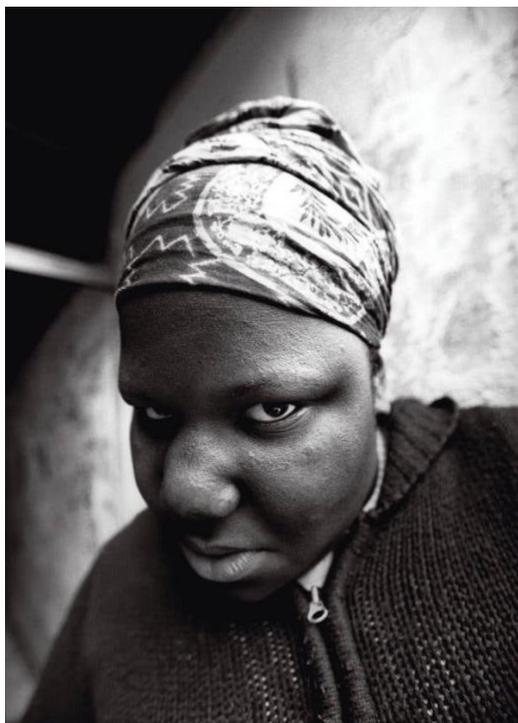
"I learned the climbing, I learned all the other stuff, except being a good writer," he said. By his own admission, his art career began in near complete ignorance. "I came from an environment where there was no art at all. I didn't know Keith Haring or Basquiat or Cartier-Bresson. I didn't know there was a job of being an artist. The narrative of other people has always been more interesting to me than mine." He shifted to documenting his friends' talents, and pasting photocopies of his pictures of them on walls, complete with spray-painted frames and the heading "Expo 2 Rue," for street gallery.



“Portrait of a Generation” (2006), his first formal commission, at a housing project on the outskirts of Paris and wheatpasted in upscale neighborhoods. It featured close-ups of young people. Credit...JR



Byron, La Forestière, Clichy-sous-Bois, France, 2006, from “Portrait of a Generation.” JR asked his young subjects to make playful but also confrontational faces, prodding at the caricatures of working-class immigrants. Credit...JR



Araba, La Forestière, Clichy-sous-Bois, 2006, from "Portrait of a Generation." The photos took on added gravity as demonstrations spread and JR's pasted pictures became the background to burning cars. Credit...JR

His first formal project, "[Portrait of a Generation](#)," from 2004, featured close-ups of young people living in public housing in the Parisian suburbs of Montfermeil and Clichy-sous-Bois. JR asked them to make exaggerated faces, then pasted the images around the bourgeois neighborhoods of Paris. They're playful but also confrontational, prodding at the conceptions of working-class immigrants in these communities as menacing. The portraits took on added gravity in the next year, as rioting by youths pointing to police abuse and inequality spread from Clichy, and JR's pasted pictures became the background to burning cars. "JR: Chronicles" opens with a wall-size print of the French-Malian filmmaker [Ladj Ly](#) pointing a camera like a shotgun, a sly subversion of media portrayals of black men, but also the kinetic potential of images and the idea that social injustices could be remedied simply by making them widely visible, something that suggests JR's working thesis.

Since then, JR has viewed his projects as correctives to durable stereotypes and incomplete characterizations of people who traditionally lack the representation to object. "What's interesting is if you talk to a woman in Brazil and a woman in Palestine, you realize that often they have the same point of view: that they're being misportrayed and they want to change that," he said.

JR's practice retains much of the graffitist's instincts and moral center: the guerrilla application, the anti-authority ethos, the elevation of those shunted to the margins. "For me it's really clear," he said. "I was writing my names on walls to say 'I exist,' then I started pasting pictures of people with their names to say *they* exist. I feel safe when I see graffiti because it shows there's life. When you go to countries and there's not one single tag on the wall, you should be stressed."



"Portrait of a Generation, B11, Destruction #2," 2013, taken at a housing project in Montfermeil, France, that was razed. Credit...JR

He doesn't spend a lot of time discussing the technical aspects of his work. "Who cares if the photo is good or not good?" he said. He's much more animated in retelling what happens after an image is pasted up and people start congregating and talking. The portrait is a provocation, an effective vehicle, but you get the sense he would happily switch to nautical flags or pottery if he knew those would take. The point is to get people to see each other, which for JR is the simplest route to understanding.

It can feel daunting to take in so many faces, each with its own history and struggle. But JR is all tightly coiled energy, bopping around the gallery, arms tracing connections in the air. He’s a gifted talker, but often, to punctuate a point he’s making, he’ll stab at your shoulder or jolt your arm. Aware both of his medium’s built-in ephemerality and a keen sense of self-promotion, he has been a consistent self-documenter from the beginning. Each of his interventions is accompanied by a short film, either made on the fly, or as his resources became more robust, with sophisticated production and a narrative assist from Robert De Niro.

For awhile, JR operated just at the outer edges of the art world, making a fairly straightforward but mostly unimpeachable kind of human interest photography that boosted empathy for his subjects. But in the last few years, under the representation of [Perrotin](#) — a global player that also represents blue-chip artists like Takashi Murakami and KAWS — produced gallery shows and the attendant sales, his work has invited institutional consideration, and criticism. There’s the knock that his persona feeds a mystique that gives his art a thrust it may otherwise not enjoy or deserve. JR defends his pseudonymous identity less for its performative affect than as a useful tool in a hostile reality.



“The Chronicles of New York City” mural features 1,128 people, whom JR and his team photographed and interviewed using a trailer studio in each of New York City’s boroughs last summer. Credit...Jonathan Dorado

"We live in a global world, but in most of the countries I go to no one knows me," he said. "In Turkey or at the Mexican border, I would be stopped before I even started. I've been arrested in a lot of countries. The day that art is welcomed the same way everywhere, I guess I wouldn't need this," he says, gesturing to his camouflage. "You know, it's kind of annoying to wear sunglasses all day."

JR's obvious analogue is [Banksy](#), whose guerrilla art and success in remaining beguilingly anonymous have yielded eight-figure auction results. "For years I would be like that, completely covered," JR said. "But I realized by not talking about the work, people would not understand the complexity of it, the layers. It implicates people, and so I wanted people to understand the subject's intention."

As his projects have evolved in complexity and reach, they've become a shorthand for the kind of citizen-of-the-world pluralism and inextinguishable optimism that can be hard to separate from naïveté. "Chronicles" includes JR's most recent project, "[The Chronicles of New York City](#)," a large-format mural featuring 1,128 people, whom JR and his team photographed and interviewed by way of a 53-foot-long trailer truck studio that trawled the five boroughs last summer. It's the third in a series of Diego Rivera-style frescos, after a similar project in San Francisco, and a [2018 Time magazine and JR commission](#) that took as its subject this country's gun control debate.



A detail from "The Chronicles of New York City," 2018-19. Credit...JR

He's been dogged in declining funding from and association with commercial brands and government entities. Still, his pictures are deliberately noncommittal, allowing viewers to affix their own conceptions to the subjects, skimming the surface of deeply intractable social problems rather than engaging with them fully. It can be a frustratingly reductive vision, an Occam's razor theory of world peace. "The first time I traveled, people told me I'm going to get killed," he said. "I think being naïve is what has helped me the most."

"People say, well they might need food, not art, and I'm like, all right, let me go check that, I want to hear from them. So I would go to Kenya or to Sierra Leone and say 'this is what I do, but you tell me if it makes sense here.'" And the response was always the same: " 'Because we're struggling we shouldn't have access to art?'"

JR insists that his work doesn't have a particular style, and so avoids a cult of personality. His "Inside Out: [The People's Art Project](#)," begun in 2011, invites participants to submit self-portraits, which his studio prints poster-sized and sends back for them to paste. It aims to transcend the artist's hand entirely.

"I didn't invent black and white or pasting," he said. "I never sign my work in the street. So actually, more people don't know who did it than people who do. I put my work in places where nobody knows me. Yes, it's giant, but there's nothing written on it. It's there for whoever wants to know."

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## JR: Chronicles

Through May 3 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway; 718-638-5000, [brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org).