

PRESSBOOK

JR

Rebel, Rebel

July 2016

For *JR at the Louvre*, on view through June 28, the artist made the Pyramide du Louvre disappear, in response to the way visitors “turn their back” to the museum in order to pose for a selfie.



The artist **JR** has turned the world into his canvas, pasting, writing and projecting his point of view—one where the invisible is seen and the unheard have a voice. Here, artist **José Parlá** sits down with his friend and sometimes collaborator to discuss his latest—and possibly most visible—project, *JR at the Louvre*.

PORTRAIT BY GLASCO BERTOLI

REBEL, REBEL

My dear friend the anonymous JR has been posting portraits of people from all walks of life—on walls, ships, massive sidewalk squares, trains, buildings, abandoned islands—all over the world. These giant images capture and fuse the textural human fabric we all share: our eyes, lips, noses, hands and bodies, so rich with emotion and history within specific topographical contexts. Their story—our story—is mixed with the orchestra of sounds emanating from the city. You can almost hear JR's brush, loaded with glue for his large scale pastings of photographs as he scrapes the walls of Paris, Havana, Istanbul, Shanghai, Tokyo, Rio and many other destinations echoing humanity's shouts in the streets. The faces scream out: "We are here, we exist, and we can make a difference!" JR sees the potential of humanity through his camera viewfinder. His documentary images

silently democratize the surfaces of cities he's touched.

JR and I first met in Paris in 2009 and we became fast friends. In 2012, JR invited me to collaborate with him on his *Wrinkles of the City* project, this time in my heartland of Havana. Since the mid 2000s I had been seeing JR's work on the walls of Paris, London and New York, while also following his projects in galleries and through his documentary films. Works like *Women Are Heroes* in Africa, Brazil, Cambodia and India as well as his *Face 2 Face* project in Israel and Palestine have been influential to many people, and certainly to young artists everywhere. He was awarded the TED Prize and the world saw a brilliant young artist as he posed the question: Can art change the world? I saw this talk and at the risk of sounding presumptuous, my answer was—and is—a resounding yes. It has

changed the world and will continue to do so, every day, as long as there are people who believe in the power of art.

JR lives between New York and Paris, but also on airplanes, as he moves across the planet. Whether working in Fukushima, Japan, to bring awareness to the victims of the Tōhoku earthquake with his massive photographic installations, or Africa to cover the ceilings of shanty towns with the huge eyes of its inhabitants, or visiting North Korea out of curiosity, or directing his first choreography work with the New York City Ballet, or engaging the history of immigration on Ellis Island—where he also directed a film starring Robert De Niro—or collaborating on a movie with the New Wave film legend Agnès Varda, or simply planning a quiet dinner for his friends at home, JR's energy and spirit motivates and inspires all who encounter him.

“If I ever have the potential to change the world it would be in changing the perception we have of the world. And for me, that’s change.”

JOSÉ PARLÁ: You’ve just finished the *Pyramide du Louvre* installation at Musée du Louvre—congratulations! It’s quite an incredible project in itself along with the projections, concerts and ateliers you curated. You’ve also collaborated with many artists for this action. Please tell us how the project came about and what inspired it.

JR: Thank you, my friend. The Louvre contacted me a year ago and we started working on the project right away. To be honest, I never imagined I would ever exhibit at the Louvre while I am alive. So one day I went there and observed the people interacting with the monument. Can you believe that people come from all over the world to turn their back to it and take a selfie? That’s why I started thinking of making it disappear from the angle where everybody takes a selfie.

It also raise the question of change, how afraid we always are when something appears or disappears. In 1989, when the pyramid was inaugurated, I was too young to remember but apparently there was a huge controversy.

PARLÁ: Is there something else we can learn about your experience during the installation or presentation of the *JR at the Louvre* project that stands out in your memory?

JR: The entire project! Installing the pyramid over weeks or even planning the 24-hour, non-stop [performance] was a real production to me and my team. I didn’t wanted to have any partnership from any brand so we had to do it all with very little budget and every artist who came to participate in the performance did it almost for free. Arcade Fire did an amazing DJ set/concert in the Tuileries that we announced one hour prior, so it was a real surprise for everybody.

Then I was on stage for six hours with artists I love, like Agnès Varda, Daniel Buren and Felice Varini, talking about art in public spaces. Later on that night, magicians took over the museum and people could wander in the empty museum interacting with them. At midnight, Nils Frahm and Olafur Arnalds did a six-hour concert for 1,000 people under the pyramid. At 6 a.m., chef Jean Imbert cooked in front of the *Victoire de Samothrace* and later, Chinese artist Liu Bolin made me disappear in front of the pyramid to close out the

performance. An unexpected twist was when the camera broke, so we had to redo the performance, including me being repainted entirely!

PARLÁ: *The Wrinkles of the City, Istanbul* was just directed by your friend Guillaume Cagniard. Please tell us about your continuous conversation with Istanbul, especially within the context of the secularization after 1924.

JR: Istanbul was such a journey for me, almost as complicated as the project we did together in Cuba. They never gave us the authorization to do the work, so I had to go guerilla style with the help of local communities. Later on, the police repainted one of the pieces and one of my friends got arrested after we left, and I had to pay some fine. So I decided to post something on social media and showed what the police painted over. In a few hours it became so viral that the city wrote us to say they were cancelling all the fines and even wanted to invite me again to repaste it. I never went back as they wanted me to do a press conference with them.

PARLÁ: What are the different ways in which your art is changing the world?

JR: If I ever have the potential to change the world it would be in changing the perception we have of the world. And for me that’s change.

PARLÁ: You have a lot of energy and many ideas. Were you always like this as a child, and can you please share with us how you first became interested in making art?

JR: I don’t remember how it started. Maybe I was doing graffiti and running all over the city trying to find the best angles to look at it differently than everyone else. It’s only later that I realized that people could call it art. As you know very well, for a long time it was called vandalism. At first it was just the way to channel my energy, but later on it became my full-time job!

PARLÁ: You’ve done very interesting and fascinating projects throughout the world. What has been your favorite?

JR: I don’t think I have a favorite project, but what I do enjoy the most is traveling around the world with my friends and team and getting to know communities by working with them.

JR on the morning of his *JR at the Louvre* debut in Paris, photographed by Giasco Bertoli, exclusively for *Cultured*.

BY GALERIE PERROTTIN





"I always try to adapt to architecture wherever I go. The architecture always dictates the frame of the photo."

UNFRAMED, a group posing in a bark moored on the beach, reviewed by JR, circa 1930, Marseille, France, 2013

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PARLÁ: You grew up in Paris where you were surrounded by the atmosphere of the urban din—the layered city walls, and the ephemeral pace of city life. You've said that you own the world's largest gallery. Were you looking at walls for inspiration at the same time that they became your gallery?

JR: I grew up in the suburbs of Paris, and all there was around me were walls—whether it was to climb or to paint on. When I started seeing them as a canvas, my entire perception of the world changed and suddenly every trip was an exploration. I would always have my face glued to the window of the train to discover a new spot that I would find later to tag or paste on. I am still fascinated by all the people who left a mark, even a small one on any wall or surface just to say they were there. When we were in Cuba, we didn't see much graffiti, but thousands of little marks on walls with people's names.

PARLÁ: Regarding photography, have you always seen your pictures as art, or was the artistic process in your work born out of an organic evolution around the actions of vernacular street culture that you experienced?

JR: I always took pictures knowing I wanted to share them with people in the streets. I had no idea there was a world of galleries and museums and rules. Later on I discovered all of it and still the street is the place where I have the most interesting interactions.

PARLÁ: You love motorcycles and you have been riding for a long time. How did you get into the sport? Is it a hobby or is it another source for your inspiration to make art?

JR: I love riding dirt bikes that have no license and no plates. I have a feeling

of freedom when I drive those in the fields or sometimes in cities. When I was a kid I had one and rode in the projects, just trying not to get caught. It would even sleep in my room as I was afraid anyone could steal it. You could smell gasoline in our entire apartment.

PARLÁ: What first drew you to want to paste your photographs on walls and how did that evolve from small photographs to large-scale pictures?

JR: I just always tried to adapt to architecture wherever I would go. The architecture always dictated the frame of the photo. In the favelas I paste mainly women's eyes because of the houses being rectangular.

PARLÁ: How did you first get interested in making documentary films?

JR: My work being ephemeral, I always documented it from the very beginning knowing that would be the only trace of it. Later on I realized that documentary film could reveal better than anything else the layers and stories behind each image.

PARLÁ: You love to climb rooftops and take pictures from above the city. Can you tell us more about that?

JR: I guess seeing anything from a different angle always attract me even if there is risk.

PARLÁ: We had a lot of fun collaborating on our project in Cuba. Having traveled to Havana a few times with you, I know you enjoy being there.

JR: Collaborating is such a hard process but I always learn so much from it. We got to know each other so much by working in Cuba with the people and creating the project together.



An installation view of "Au Panthéon!"
at Panthéon Paris, 2014