Urban Dramaturgy
The Global Art Project of JR

Bertie Ferdman

"WELCOME TO THE *INSIDE OUT* PROJECT.
A collaboration between the artist JR, the TED prize, and you."

The excerpt above is on the home page of *Inside Out* (www.insideoutproject .net), a large-scale participatory art project "that transforms messages of personal identity into pieces of artistic work."[1] The premise is straightforward: you upload a black-and-white portrait of yourself, along with a statement regarding the social change you desire, or what you stand for, or what you care about in this world. Your uploaded digital image is made into an oversized poster and sent back to you, for you to exhibit (paste) in your local community, anywhere that is public, no permit necessary. As the Website explains:

> People can participate as an individual or in a group; posters can be placed anywhere, from a solitary image in an office window to a wall of portraits on an abandoned building or a full stadium. These exhibitions will be documented, archived and viewable virtually.

The artist behind this global art project is JR, the recent TED prize winner now turned international art star, thanks largely to this TED glory and its subsequent media frenzy. A self-proclaimed "artivist"—somewhere between an artist and an activist—and a "photograffeur"—somewhere between a photographer and a graffiti artist—who still goes only by his initials ("if I had to disclose my real name . . . it would deviate from the people and the meaning of my work"), JR is renowned for illegally pasting oversized portraits of individuals in cities across the world. He has "exhibited" his projects in conflict zones and extremely poor neighborhoods, among them Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya; Providencia in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Clichy-sous-Bois in the outskirts of Paris, France; and the Israel/Palestine border. All of these were part of a larger project titled *28 Millimeters*, whereby JR took portraits with a 28mm lens, forcing him to photograph his subjects from very close up, and simultaneously gaining their trust to do so.

For *Portrait of a Generation* for example, the first of his *28 Millimeter* series, which he initiated in 2005 after his first "guerrilla" exhibition in the streets of Montfermeil

in 2004 and after the riots that spread throughout France, JR worked in collaboration with friend and colleague Ladj Ly, a local filmmaker, to respond to the desires of the youngsters from this working-class suburb of Paris to be photographed, and pasted the oversized images in buildings throughout the neighborhood. *Portrait of a Generation* eventually grew to feature photographs of the youths making grimaces. Responding to the riots' mass media coverage of these first and second-generation immigrants as alienated, criminal, and dangerous, JR and his collaborators appropriated these negative images by exaggerating how others viewed them, becoming somewhat comic, grotesque, and quite effectively, charming and approachable. JR glued the giant images in the fancy central district of Paris, where the *cités* residents were often not welcome, and where they could not afford to live.

It was a way to break the subjects' isolation, if only through mediated means, and activate them in different environments. The images, in their new setting, performed an alternate city: one filled with tensions its citizens did not necessarily want to confront. "I pasted huge posters everywhere," explains JR, "in the bourgeois area of Paris, with their name, age, and building number." In 2006, one year after the riots came to an end, but not necessarily the tensions that had sparked them, the "official" exhibition of *Portrait of a Next Generation* was displayed in the city hall of Paris, forcing onlookers to contemplate the distinctions, discriminations, and inequalities that had fueled such anger in the first place.

The second of JR's *28 Millimeter* project was *Face2Face*, completed in 2007 and considered by many as one of the largest illegal urban art exhibits in the world. It covered the entire surface of the Israeli West Bank Barrier with paired portraits of Palestinians and Israelis that held the same job and made a similar expression for the camera. Working with his collaborators as well as on-site volunteers, JR posted these large-format portraits side-by-side, face-to-face, on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides of the wall, so that onlookers could barely tell who was from the other side of the fence. His documentary *Women are Heroes* (released in 2010) features the last of the *28 Millimeter* series, which focused on portraits of women and documents the work he did in Cambodia, Kenya, Sierra Leone, India, and Brazil, spanning over three years. In Kibera for example, rooftops were covered with water resistant vinyl photos of the eyes and faces of the women who live there, both visibly changing the landscape and preventing the rain from damaging the shacks. The train that passed on the Kibera line was also covered with the eyes of the women that live right below it, with the bottom halves of their faces pasted on the slope right under the tracks, so that in the few seconds that the train passed their faces were completed; the idea being to celebrate, and at the very least to acknowledge, these women's presence.

What draws me to JR's portraits, besides their striking aesthetic appeal, are the ways these perform alternative narratives of city spaces by giving a voice, through the medium of photography, to actors/inhabitants who are often otherwise ignored by the mainstream media, and who often live in poverty. In order to accomplish this goal JR very strategically chooses to remain, at least symbolically, anonymous, almost like the Robin Hood of the art world:

Top: *28 Millimetres: Portrait of a Generation*, photo of Ladj Ly pasted in Clichy-sous-Bois, 2004. Bottom: *Inside Out*, Ciudad Juarez, 2011. Photos: JR. Courtesy the artist.
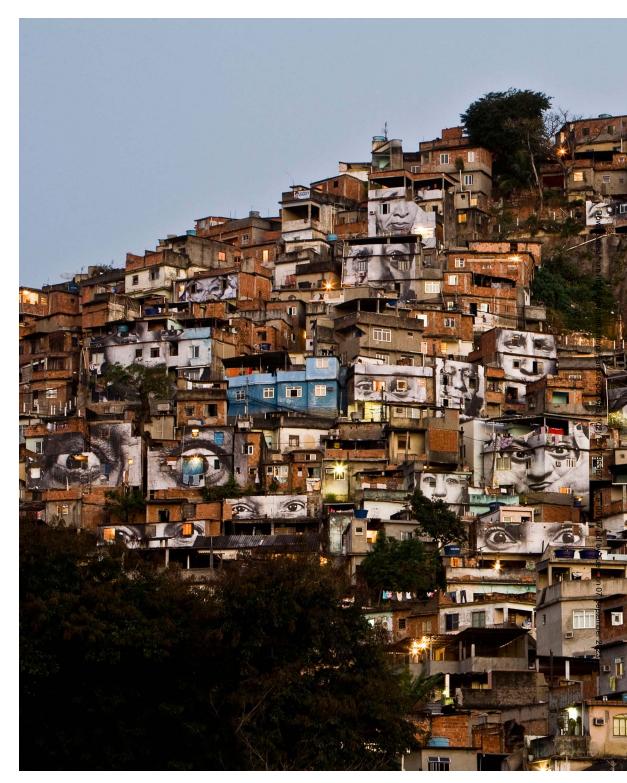
> The majority of "graffeurs" (graffiti artists) begin by tagging their name on the walls. I take the names and above all the faces of people that live in the margins of society and give them back their individuality. That might seem paradoxical, but it's almost like I don't have a name and I give them back theirs, their *lettres des noblesse*, to those whose name we have forgotten.
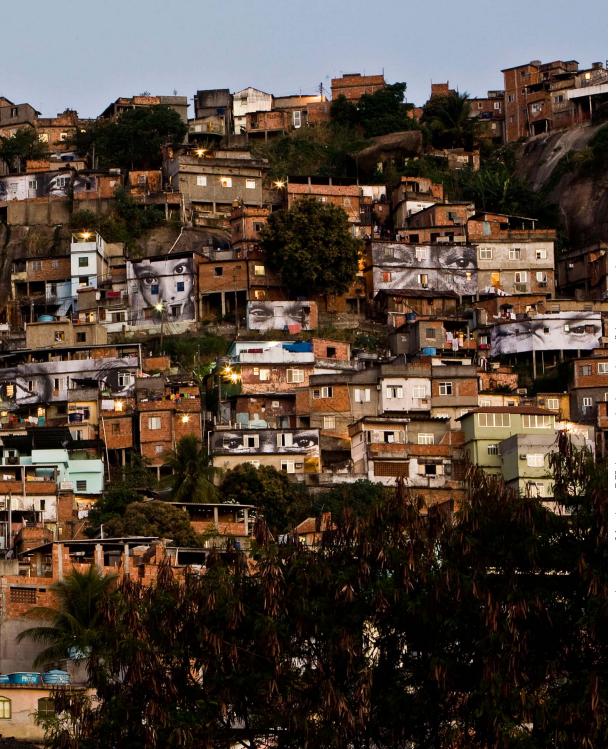
JR's work, which he refers to as "participatory art," and as "pervasive art," spreads exponentially through the globe as regular citizens begin to take up more physical space than they are normally allowed, or used to. In all his projects, JR spends months getting to know the population of the neighborhood he is encountering, working alongside them not only to paste their own portraits in huge format, but also to decide where to paste these. As the photos get washed away, the work eventually disappears, leaving only its documentation as both proof that the work existed, and as the work itself (the documentation is what eventually gets exhibited *inside* the gallery). But "the *oeuvre* is the collage, more than the portrait itself," explains JR in a 2009 interview at the Rencontres d'Arles, the Arts Photo Festival where his work was featured in the spaces of the city. "When I began . . . I immediately used the street as my gallery. . . . And little by little I enlarged the photos to adapt them to the architecture." Hence there is both a site-specific and an ephemeral component to his work—seeing the pasted poster-sized portrait in city space—rather than a picture of this urban installation. This *mise-en-scène* creates a contemporary form of urban storytelling, captivating the imagination of passersby whereby space and site are recreated and reimagined to tell yet untold narratives.

As a self-taught photographer, JR is more inspired by a photography lineage than by the visual arts (painting, sculpture, conceptual art, etc.). His work stems from street art movements but also fits into a trajectory of politically inspired artwork like Happenings, which shares a common ground in terms of the work's ephemerality and its participatory element. Besides parallels with artists like Blu and Banksy, whose anti-establishment stance is part of the work's rhetoric, JR's installations also reflect the latest trend in contemporary art practice, what art critic Claire Bishop has termed "the social turn" in her often-quoted essay from *Artforum*, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents." Performance scholar Shannon Jackson takes Bishop's terminology in her latest book *Social Acts*, discussing at length art works whose aesthetics and social provocations coincide and unsettle "some of the binary frames that many use to judge both social efficacy and aesthetic legitimacy."[2]

It is particularly at this juncture in JR's work—where the aesthetic and the social meet—and how he seems to both balance and deny this partnership altogether, that his work is most poignant. To what extent he aestheticizes the city as opposed to re-appropriating its already-established aesthetic is elusive and depends highly on the medium-specific apparatus by which one critiques his work. Like many of the artists Jackson discusses in her book who walk a fine line between aesthetics and politics (Paul Chan, Santiago Sierra, Rimini Protokoll, and Francis Alÿs, among others), JR is adamant to separate his politics from his art, clearly demarcating the "art" as the autonomous space where things can happen.

28 Millimetres: Women Are Heroes, view of Favela Morro Da Providencia, Rio de Janeiro, 2008.
Photo: JR. Courtesy the artist.

In an interview in 2006, conducted in the *Journal de 13H* on France 2, a popular French TV channel, JR was asked, in reference to his *28 Millimeter* project in Clichy: What does this project provide to the members of the community you worked with? "First of all," he answers, "this is not a social or political project. It is first of all an artistic one, which is why I am not a spokesperson for the youth of Clichy, so I don't search to change things in that way, but it is really a project we did together. I am very happy that in fact, through these artworks, the image of these youngsters change."

Indeed, the notion of "change" and how it operates in projects that engage art as social action is of particular importance in gauging this kind of work. In her essay, Bishop makes the claim that "these practices are less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity—whether in the form of working with preexisting communities or establishing one's own interdisciplinary network."[3] In JR's case, however, he makes the explicit demarcation that his work *not* be judged by the efficacy of its civic engagement, even though it clearly resembles what Suzanne Lacy has described as New Genre Public Art, summarized here by Bishop as "temporary projects that directly engage an audience—particularly groups considered marginalized—as active participants in the production of a process-oriented, politically conscious community event or program." On the contrary, JR's insistence in the ability to sustain art's autonomy is precisely what makes his work able to engage in civic discourse. After all, it was the beauty of his images (documenting the projects) that drew me to his work *before* I discovered there was a commitment to social activism. In his acceptance speech for the TED prize, which itself is committed to spreading ideas that can impact "change," JR states:

> In some ways, art can change the world. I mean, art is not supposed to change the world, the practical things. But it can change perceptions. It can change the way we see the world. . . . Actually, the fact that art *cannot* change things, makes it a neutral place for exchanges and discussion. (my emphasis)

Precisely by distancing art from what he very clearly aspires art to *do*, that is, to *change* something (our perceptions, society, dialogue, etc.), does he seem to achieve it. In other words, he introduces change by alienating art from the political and the social, necessarily clinging to its very autonomy (as neutral!) in order to produce highly involved community-oriented installations. This seems to be his modus operandi. "*Je suis un colleur d'affiches*" (I am a poster paster) is his reply to: Are you politically engaged? "I search with my art to install the work in improbable places, to create with the communities projects that promote questioning . . . and to offer alternative images to those of the global media."[4] Of particular interest is the way he enters the art world market, selling limited editions of photographs as art commodities, in order to raise money that goes back to financing the work, for example a cultural center in Providencia, and 2000 square meters of new rooftops to further seal the community's homes in Kibera.[5] If anything, these projects, although artistically driven, are socially committed.

For his TED Prize 2011 award of $100,000, which is used to fund the winner's "One Wish to Change the World," JR chose to turn the world "inside out"—in order to enable others to occupy space with their own photographic portraits. What is elemental about *Inside Out* is what one does with the poster-size printed images once they are uploaded digitally and sent back. Where does one choose to paste them? What space, in one's community, in one's everyday environment, in one's city, does one wish to occupy? The statement one wishes to deliver becomes the space taken over with the image(s). In other words, it is the performance of these mediated images that defines the work. The portrait by itself is not complete. It is the contact with everyday public space, a contact with a specific site that provides the context for the work to exist and gives it meaning. And yet, because most of these pasted images will eventually disappear (get washed away, torn down, or pasted over), the (art) work also exists as a digital virtual archive of what interventions took place.

There are numerous videos on the Website as well as a YouTube channel devoted to the project, with a Web Series directed by Alastair Siddons (who is currently working on a documentary feature about JR's *Inside Out*) in which one can see the process behind many of the interventions that have taken place throughout the world. But the Internet and digital media here are not just a repository of the work: they are also the means by which the project exists. *Inside Out*, while stemming from low-tech, low-production (a.k.a. low budget) street art, is just as rooted in advances in technology that facilitate global communication as much as it is in its grassroots appeal.

JR's *Inside Out* project, like much of his other work, creates alternative cities through both mediated performance strategies and the performance practices of media. His use of social media practices (in terms of creating art solely with user-generated content) circumvents the larger economies of the art world value narrative with a desire to provide agency for citizens to shape their cities. JR's images are not isolated: they are part of a carefully construed *mise-en-scène* whose dramaturgy is intricately connected to the communicative strategies he uses to create and document the work. Through the proliferation of large-scale portraits pasted across the globe, and through media and the performance of media (where he "stages" his photos) for actor/citizens, JR seeks to reattribute a platform.

JR's *Inside Out* would not be possible without the advent of the Internet and digital media practices, which permit the artist to get others around the globe involved. If, as Andy Warhol suggests in his *Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, "before media there used to be a physical limit on how much space one person could take up by themselves," now that space has been exponentially multiplied.[6] JR's *Inside Out* seeks precisely to take up as much space as possible by as many people as possible. However, whereas Warhol's quote stems from a fascination with fame, JR's interest here is in displaying and reproducing otherwise anonymous, and often times unwanted, faces that live and work in the sites they choose to exhibit. And, with *Inside Out*, and the TED team's crucial marketing help, he has potentially created a Facebook of art-making: owned and created by the people/actors who participate in it. "I don't use any brand of corporate sponsor," JR has repeatedly said, "so I have no responsibility to anyone

Inside Out Project, Tunisia, 2011. Top: Pasting on the ex-house of the Ben Ali party. Bottom: Pasting in the former police station of La Goulette (Tunis) burned during the revolution. On the ground are all the identity cards with photos and fingerprints of the population. Photos: JR. Courtesy the artist.

but myself and the subject."[7] Precisely because his work walks a fine line between images (for art's sake) and advertising, alluding in a way to the very Warholian notion of art *as* marketing, the very "marketing" of his project seems implicitly part of the work. There is a sense that the global digital machinery, which also enables large-scale corporate marketing campaigns to exist, is put to work with *Inside Out* at the local level, for and by the individuals who choose to participate.

While *Inside Out* speaks directly to matters of uneven distribution of power and inequality—about the city—it also indirectly deals with the problem of the art establishment by eluding and therefore creating new apparatuses simultaneously outside and from within the very institution that labels his work as "art," redefining how we view and display the work. By taking the literal (and physical) space of the street into the virtual commons, a space where we can all upload our images and then see the myriad interventions that have taken place, *Inside Out* produces new frameworks by which others can create and reclaim their cities. The art belongs to no one and everyone.

Take *Artocracy* for example (*Artocratie en Tunisie*), one of *Inside Out*'s first installations, which took place in Tunisia March 16–23, less than two months after the Arab Spring street demonstrations that eventually ousted President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in January 2011. It happened before the official launch of the *Inside Out* Website, so the photographs were not technically uploaded to the server but are nevertheless archived there. The project was launched by Slim Zeghal and Marco Berrebi, and realized by photographers Sophia Baraket, Rania Douraï, Wissal Darguèche, Aziz Tnani, Hichem Driss, and Hela Ammar, all of who volunteered their time and expertise. They asked hundreds people to have their portraits taken. Sometimes they would stop them on the street, let them know what this was about, and enter into a discussion about the future of their country as the photos were taken.

Eventually they, along with hundreds of volunteers, pasted the images in symbolic places around the neighborhood of Tunis, le Kram, and Sidi Bouzid, the village where the revolution started. One young boy who was interviewed (in *Inside Out*, Episode 1, YouTube) tells of his initial skepticism: "At first I didn't understand what you were doing, pasting portraits everywhere." After an open discussion, he opens to the idea of seeing "hundreds, thousands of people that are not famous. They are not stars, they are not journalists. They are people like us. . . . It's not the same faces, but it's the same people." Instead of Ben Ali, whose image was the only one allowed to be pasted in public—and it was everywhere—*Inside Out* was now enabling the people of Tunisia, via the medium of photography, to take over spaces formerly occupied by the autocratic ruler. Portraits were pasted at The Big Wall of Ben Ali, his former headquarters and former police centers. *Inside Out* was thus mediating the performance of freedom, in public, by having spectators/actors participate in their own democracy. "The cult of personality is over," declared another participant, "now it's the people. All the social classes are represented. Now, we recognize ourselves."

Beside Tunisia, *Inside Out* has by now, as I write these lines, reached almost 9,000 locations, with a total of 226 projects and over 74,000 uploaded photos. The project spans numerous countries including Pakistan, the United States, Australia, Portugal, South Africa, Canada, Venezuela, and Thailand, among many others. The minimal Web technology in developing countries (on the African and Asian continents, in particular) as well as prevalent censorship in non-democratic countries might be reasons to assume why *Inside Out* has not reached a more diverse range of populations, as the Internet itself purports to access. Recently, however, it came to the much mediatized Ciudad Juarez, whose escalating violence due to the drug trade has caused a devastating toll: in 2010 alone, 3000 people were murdered in the city, according to CNN Mexico. Photographer Mónica Lozano conceived of "*Inside Out* Project Juarez," as a reaction to the constant negative media attention her native Juarez received in the international press while she was living abroad. Wanting instead to depict "the real faces" of the city, and yet, according to the *Inside Out* Juarez blog, "not denying the difficulties they go through," Lozano joined forces with fourteen other local photographers who took more than 1,000 portraits of people from all social classes (see: http://insideoutjuarez.tumblr.com).

Together with a team of more than forty volunteers, they pasted the images on October 29, 2011, on both sides of the Rio Bravo, the border between Mexico and the United States. The word "PEACE" was inscribed in English with the photographs on the Juarez side, and "AMOR," in Spanish on the American side. Even though Lozano had provided for the proper permits before the installation, the "action" was halted by American patrols that had apparently not been notified. Despite this small impediment, "Inside Out Project Juarez" represented one of the largest *Inside Out* projects to date and influenced other similar "movements" elsewhere, among them "Inside Out El Paso." It received significant media exposure, which is precisely what Lozano had hoped for when she imagined the project: to change the image of Ciudad Juarez in the eyes of the international community, and to emphasize the people's strength and endurance during such trying times. The "feel good" peaceful art message of the project was nevertheless contextualized through Lozano's own realistic aspirations (themselves posted on the Facebook page for the project):

> Pasting photos on walls won't resolve the problems confronted presently by the city. It will not console those who have lost loved ones, nor bring back the peace in which we lived before. We are conscience of this and do not search for this. However, we want our project to be a kind of spark that results in a positive thought, if only one. (my translation)

JR's *Inside Out* is here a completely local phenomenon—a global art project with local ramifications, responding to local problems, mounted by local people. The work belongs to those who created it and to those who saw it. *Inside Out*, conceptualized by JR as a "global art project," was only the motor behind such installations, similar to the way social media was itself conceived. The collage in this case was an "action," with people's involvement their participation, manifested clearly by the police's will to stop the art that was actually "happening."

Face2Face Project, wall on the Palestinian Side, after Bethlehem Check Point, 2007.
Photo: JR. Courtesy the artist.

28 Millimetres: Women Are Heroes, aerial view of Kibera, Kenya, 2009. Photo: JR.
Courtesy the artist.

The act of pasting one's mediated image unto a public space is an urban strategy of performing one's city. The image's new presence *in situ*, as it is now re-inscribed in the city, allows for different associations regarding what that urban space was/is for, its history, and its potential futures. The use of digital reproduction in performance, as it is used in *Inside Out*, theatricalizes city space with alarming and immediate presence, precisely because this mode of technology enables participants to communicate as well as produce (upload *and* paste), seeking to create a more democratic spreading of communicative power. Here, the real (the individual photographed) becomes spectacular, and the spectacular (mediated images that *perform* the city), now real. It is a literal space where the aesthetic and the social coincide: but JR's conceptual framing of the project seems to cancel the other out constantly.

In Guy Debord's "society of spectacle," his term for the alienating and omnipresent culture industry, where "the spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere," the only possibility of rupturing the system is from within the very structures that define and enable it. With *Inside Out*, the act of pasting, the performative gestus or utterance, alters the agency/subject dynamic. It substitutes the culture industry for cultural empowerment. As participants upload photos and literally *site* these mediated images, they are co-opting Debord's society of spectacle logic, if only at the instance when the action is performed, moving toward Debord's own proposed psychogeographic practices. By using the dominant system's very mode of production alternatively, and territorially, in the city, subjects (now agents) come to understand *more* their own existence and desires. Given the time he was writing, and the fact that he was one of the main, if not *the* main proponent of The Situationists, Debord's position and hope in recuperating agency, lies in the occupation and re-imagination of the city:

> Urbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into *its own peculiar décor*.[8]

So re-appropriating the city is for Debord of key importance to break the décor. Seen amidst the current movements such as Occupy Wall Street that have sprung throughout the world, *Inside Out* also performs it own urban speech act, whereby the *mise-en-scène* of the image—its literal production mounted *live in city space*—utters the invisible visible: the forgotten present. It is territorial without necessarily taking up physical space. This vanishing *mise-en-scène* in the city is a contemporary urban strategy that is akin to the theatrical, and hence an event I would like to call an "urban *dramaturgy*." By scripting a role for participants via mediated performance strategies and digital technological advances, *Inside Out* incites new kinds of audience participation within the city and blurs the lines between actor/audience (agent/subject). By the term "urban" I mean it not only as a spatial term but also as a process and concept that implies human rights, as explicitly stated with The Right to the City Alliance, a movement officially founded at the first United States Social Forum. The mission (as found in the Website www.righttothecity.org) reads:

> Right to the City Alliance was born . . . out of the power of an idea of a new kind of urban politics that asserts that everyone, particularly the disenfranchised, not only has a right to the city, but as inhabitants, have a right to shape it, design it, and operationalize an urban human rights agenda.

What the city has come to represent (food, water, shelter, job security, health) is not a privilege, but a right. As David Harvey argues in his "Right to the City" manifesto, urbanization is and has always been a class phenomenon. "The question of what kind of city we want," he declares, "cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies, and aesthetic values we desire."[9] This is the new "urban" I wish to engage with in contextualizing *Inside Out*'s mediated performance practice. I add "dramaturgy" to this term since with it I refer to the possibility that stories can be told from different perspectives, that composition in a given context renders meaning through interpretation, and that imagination renders something real. "Dramaturgy" also connotes narrative (not necessarily a linear one), which is essential in establishing what story we want to tell, for whom, and by whom. *Inside Out*'s urban dramaturgy plays with the structure, rhythm, and flow of the city, via mediated performance practices, to enact new stories of what our cities are and for whom.

In *Writings on Cities*, as with many of his other works, Henri Lefebvre argues that the very survival of capitalism is due to the creation of a carefully construed spatialization, hidden from critical view. Intent on unveiling space's inner logic and on the potential influence of art in reshaping the urban (Lefebvre was part of Debord's Situationists early on), Lefebvre clarifies that "this does not mean to prettify urban space with works of art, but leaving aside representation, ornamentation, and decoration, art can become *praxis* and *poiesis* on a social scale."[10] Like *Inside Out*'s urban dramaturgies—produced, consumed, and owned by the very people who create the work—Lefebvre urged urban dwellers to *make use* of the city: to appropriate it by re-creating existing space. In "Right to the City," Harvey advances Lefebvre's concept as "far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: "it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city." He continues: "The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is . . . one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights." This desire to build another kind of world, including a different kind of urban experience, is inherent in JR's *Inside Out* through both mediated performance strategies and the performance practices of media. What we see changes our perception of the thing we are seeing. As JR himself notes: "To change the way you see things is already to change things themselves."

NOTES

1. *Inside Out*'s project Website is constantly changing, and this version was taken from January 2012.

2. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 45.

3. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum* 44 (February 2006): 179.

4. Culturebulences, "Au delà du graffiti: rencontre avec JR, colleur d'affiches engages," February 2011, m2jc2010.wordpress.com.

5. In Kibera, the JR Foundation has recovered 2,000 square meters of new rooftops to further seal the community houses (with their own portraits). The book, *Women are Heroes*, was distributed in Kibera and signed by the women of the project. As part of his large-scale project in Providença, JR founded Casa Amarela, a cultural center for children in the heart of the favela. For this project, The Canon Group donated fifteen digital cameras and a PIXMA printer.

6. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Mariner Books, 1977), 146.

7. According to the Website, *Inside Out* "is not sponsored by any brand." In order to fund the project, special TED limited edition lithographs are available for purchase, and/or one can donate directly via Paypal on the web. In addition to the TED prize money, the project is funded by The Sapling Foundation and Social Animals.

8. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1967), 121.

9. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (September–October 2008).

10. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 173.

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