

Face value

The famous French street artist/photographer JR landed in Tel Aviv just in time to capture the real people behind the social protest, as part of an ambitious 10-day project.

By Sefi Hendler, Published September 9, 2011

Quite a few familiar faces starred on the posters displayed Saturday night during the huge

demonstration in Tel Aviv, among them tycoons Nochi Dankner ("N No Nochi Mezzuman" one poster read - a play on the Bratslav followers' slogan) and Ilan-Ben Dov, and of course Benjamin Netanyahu. But in addition to famous figures, it was hard to ignore dozens of people who carried posters with unusual faces: their own. They came to the demo proudly holding outsize black-and-white portraits of themselves. "To show that I am at the center," one of them told a somewhat stunned television reporter during a live broadcast.



Five hours earlier, on Rothschild Boulevard, outside what was probably the weirdest photo booth in the city, not everyone grasped the situation fully. But they were smart enough to understand that if they wanted a 1.5 meter-high self-portrait, they had better enter the truck which was itself decorated

with a gigantic pixelated black-and-white photograph.

"Have you heard of this French artist JR?" someone says. "He is photographing the face of the protest." One of the young women standing in line asks another, "Do you feel like the 'face of the protest,' sister?" Before they have a chance to discuss this weighty question, they are already inside the photo booth and a few minutes later they go to the back part of the vehicle and catch with two hands the huge portraits the printer is spewing out.

"Now the thing is to scatter these," the all-knowing young man tells them, and the three walk off, proudly brandishing the huge portraits they got thanks to the hippest instant-photo deal in town.

Overseeing this colorful celebration in black and white is a frenetic young man in straw hat and sunglasses. This is JR, arguably the most famous street artist in the world, not counting Britain's legendary Banksy. JR will not divulge his full name, barely agrees to answer questions, and is even less happy about being photographed.

"I have to maintain secrecy," says the person whom many consider to be a leading figure in the world of contemporary art. His current project is entitled "Time is now! Yalla!" and he is here to promote it in Israel and Palestine.



Mystery man

JR was born in Paris 28 years ago. According to his official biography, for what it's worth, he decided to become a photographer after finding a camera in the Metro as a teenager.

"At first I did graffiti, then I pasted pictures on walls, then I enlarged them," he says, briefly summing up the process by which his distinctive style evolved. While he has become a famous artist in the meantime, JR maintains the pretense of being a young man who's about to spray graffiti and run off for fear of the cops. Why all the mystery, even now, we ask. "It is a way to remain myself and to reach different places without being immediately identified," he explains. That is, of course, impossible in light of all the publicity that has surrounded him in recent years.

"Usually the media want to know everything about me," JR sighs, "where I spend my vacations, what I ate over the weekend - but then people will know me and not my projects. And besides, what I do is illegal and there are quite a few countries I cannot enter or in which I was fined. I was even expelled from here," he recalls with a smile.

Despite past run-ins with the Israeli authorities, Rothschild Boulevard welcomed

JR with open arms this time around: Last weekend his mobile photo booth was positioned in the heart of the protest, and apart from a parking ticket, his landing in the country was soft.



His goal: to shoot 10,000 portraits of people in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Haifa within 10 days. Each participant enters the booth, looks into the camera, makes a face and is automatically immortalized. The subjects receive the poster-sized portraits for free and are encouraged by JR and his coworkers to paste them on walls in the area. After two days of work, the project's success is obvious to anyone who finds himself on the boulevard: Dozens of faces gaze out at passersby, from walls near Habima Square and all along Rothschild.

When the first photos started to come out of the printer on Friday evening, JR gazed benignly, like a father handing out toys to his children, at the responses of the people on the street to his project. "Some said, 'It is beautiful and I want to keep it.' Others replied, 'What is there to keep? Paste it up! We will all paste them up!' And that is what they did" - with the help of glue made for them by the French artist and his team. "This wouldn't happen in Paris," JR explains, "where people immediately want to keep it as an art object at home. And you won't be able to persuade them that they have not actually been recruited to participate in some sort of struggle."

Despite his young age and the fact that he avoids describing himself as a "political"

artist, JR is a veteran of social protests. He burst into the French consciousness between 2004 and 2006, when he created a jolting series of huge photographs in suburbs of Paris and pasted them on the walls of neighborhoods considered particularly violent. He titled that project "28 Millimeters" because of the type of lens he used - but not only that: He chose the name mainly to emphasize that he shoots people close-up and does not seek to create distant, impersonal photos featuring, say, young masked men torching cars.

When the riots in the Paris suburbs erupted, at the end of 2005, "the first car was set on fire across from a building on which a photograph of mine had been pasted, showing a young man holding a camera like a weapon," he recalled this week on placid Rothschild Boulevard. His reputation soared overnight thanks to the light of the flames.

The French establishment quickly grasped the power of JR's images and embraced him. He was soon invited to affix his enlarged photos to the walls of various buildings - with the permission of the Paris municipality. He showed the French burghers pictures of young people from the suburbs making faces. A pixel of humor against prejudice. From that moment, the career of the self-styled photographeur (a fusion of a photographer and a graphic artist) took off.



While his works have been sold for tens of thousands of dollars at auction, JR is not one to rest on his laurels. Four years ago, he embarked on a new project, which he termed

"the biggest illegal photo exhibition ever": Together with Marco Berrebi - a French Jew who has accompanied him for many years - JR and his group set out to take pictures and to paste them to both sides of Israel's separation wall. The images of a rabbi, an imam and a priest making faces at the camera, enlarged to huge dimensions and pasted on the horrifying concrete expanse, became one of the most provocative expressions of Israel's political and security situation.

Berrebi, who is also accompanying JR in Israel now, recalls that in that project, entitled "Face2Face," they "wanted to 'push the border,' to show that people are not so different."

However, this time around, JR's aim appears to be substantially different. When he pasted portraits from both sides on the separation wall, he forced the Israelis and the Palestinians to look at one another. This time he suggests that society observe itself. Only on the Internet will people be able to look at the other side [whether Israeli or Palestinian], too, if they so desire.

Have you given up? Have you chosen to let each side focus on itself and no more?

JR: "With 'Face 2Face,' people remember only the wall, but we actually put up portraits of Israelis and Palestinians who have the same profession next to each other in eight different cities. So it isn't that we were just at the wall and have now backed off ... This time we chose to give the people themselves [the portraits] so they could use them as a weapon, for whatever aim they see fit."



Historic moment

The idea of coming to Tel Aviv and Ramallah in September stems from the dramatic events that are rocking everyone who lives between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River - from the March of the Million last Saturday to the expected declaration of a Palestinian state in less than two weeks. JR's feeling was that this is a historic moment, and thus he decided to place himself at the disposal of the public in Tel Aviv and Ramallah alike.

JR: "We started to tell ourselves that it was important to do it. The problem was that we didn't have money. Usually the projects get financing: I am invited and an institution, such as a museum or a municipality, pays for the photography booth. But in this case no one invited us and even in our rosiest dreams, the two sides would not have invited us together." As a result, he chose to finance the endeavor himself: "The money comes from the sale of my works. But that takes time. We were able to sell works on August 10, and two days later we ordered the printers."

There were immense logistical problems, just the type of thing that does not deter JR & Co. They arrived in the country without even a place to safely install their very expensive printers.

"We looked for safe places but couldn't find any. In fact, when we got here [last Thursday] we didn't know if the project would work. But we embarked on the journey," he said proudly at midday Saturday, when three of his four trucks were already operating and

printing pictures. As ever more prints were distributed to ever more people, JR was energized in a way that infected everyone around him. He urged people to have their picture taken and to paste the huge prints on walls or wherever they chose.

"I believe that real change cannot come from the outside, but from people themselves. Until now, in all my projects we took pictures in the field and then went back to paste them up. But in this project we chose to ... become people's helpers. I do not treat the portraits as my pictures and I am not the one who glues them to the wall. I only supply printing services. In the next stage I will retire," he laughs.

JR is careful not to sign the prints in large letters or write the title of the project on them blatantly. He prefers to let the image do its own work.

"Someone asked me, 'Why not write "social justice" on the photographs? After all, everyone agrees with it.' I told him he could write whatever he wants." But the artist himself refuses to encumber his work with flagrant messages. What was important for him was that "for the first time people will march here while carrying their own pictures. That gives the march a face."

Like the organizers of the March of the Million, JR also declines to define the success or failure of his project in quantitative terms. "Even if we stop now, it is already a success," he insists. "Why? Because there are already dozens of pictures on the streets of Tel Aviv and also on the other side, in Bethlehem. Afterward we can play with the numbers. We did not tell ourselves that success would be 10,000 portraits. For me even 100 is very symbolic. It is important for me that people reclaim ownership of themselves. For the portrait to become really and truly theirs. As soon as you see people pasting the pictures

on the walls, you realize that it is already working."

Images of democracy

The local portrait-printing campaign is only one part of a far more ambitious, global project which JR has embarked on, entitled "Inside Out." Last March he was awarded a prize by TED, an American nonprofit organization that has become hugely popular in the past few years. In addition to organizing highly publicized conferences about "ideas worth spreading," TED awards an annual prize of \$100,000 to people who have "one wish to change the world." Prize recipients have ranged from Bono to Jamie Oliver and Bill Clinton, and the latest winner is JR, who declared: "I wish for you to stand up for what you care about by participating in a global art project, and together we'll turn the world...INSIDE OUT." And the catchy title of his project is just that. For the project, a website has been created where everyone can upload his portrait, get it back printed in the mail and then paste it on a wall in his city (www.insideoutproject.net/). His idea is "to make invisible people visible."

The timing was perfect for taking the project to the Arab world. Immediately after receiving the prize, JR traveled to Tunisia, making it the first country in which he would try to give people "renewed ownership" of their image. In a country that had been ruled by a dictatorship until a few weeks earlier, the visit and the dissemination of the posters assumed a different, more dramatic meaning. "I had already pasted pictures in places which were in total chaos," he says, "in Liberia, Sudan, the favelas in Brazil. What I saw in Tunisia I had never seen anywhere else. For example, the fact that people tore our pictures off the walls - at first I didn't understand that this too was a success. An old man came up to us and said, 'You know, people have a right to paste them and others have a right to remove them; that is called

democracy. You have known it since you were born, we are discovering it today.' And from that moment, what could I reply? How can it be compared to projects in other places? Of course, the concept is the same everywhere, but it becomes different in each place."

With unconcealed pride, he adds, "We started more or less when the revolution started. It's important for people to assume the right of speech, and that is what is happening. This project could not have come at a better moment. These are the faces of the people we want to see in the street. We do not put up pictures of leaders, of famous people, presidents, only of people" in the broadest sense of the word.

"When you make it possible for people to reclaim ownership of their image, it becomes their struggle," he says, adding that people "have a different view of their own image, stemming from different contexts. They use it for different purposes. In Paris, people want to take the picture home, because they perceive it as a work of art. In Tunisia we saw people who wanted to switch the dictator's picture with theirs."

So, photography, too, is apparently a matter of geography. Furthermore, in his work, JR challenges the concept of art, the question of the place of the image in the public space, and of course the issue of the self and its image. Who is the artist? Is it him or perhaps the automatic photo booth? Or maybe it's actually the person who goes into the street and pastes the poster up in the place of his choosing? The answer differs for each photographic subject and differs also from country to country, from city to city. The tent-dweller on Rothschild Boulevard who carries his portrait in the mass demonstration has a different agenda from the old man in Tunisia who wants to rip the pictures off the wall.

"It also assumes a completely different meaning in Palestine," JR relates. "Some

people ask if these are pictures of 'martyrs,' others say they want to paste them on the wall because they have had their fill of pictures of martyrs and they want to see other things on the streets. I find that very powerful."

Does he feel that he has achieved celebrity status in Israel? "You say 'JR' to people and they say they don't know who he is, you show them a picture [from the projects] and they say of course they know. During 10 years of work, I have not allowed my portrait to be taken during an interview, but only show the pictures of people. I try to make sure the participants are at the front of the stage. If you place yourself up front, you can't do a project which centers on people."

And behind the cool shades and trademark hat, has success changed JR? Definitely not, he asserts: "Publicity was never a goal. It can kill you or it can help you. You have to be careful. I set myself clear rules which must not be broken. You must not allow any commercial firm to exploit you. They offer you partnership and promise artistic freedom - and that is exactly the trap."

So, local tycoons could have their pictures taken like everyone else in the Rothschild Blvd. booth or via the website - but this is one artist they won't be able to buy for the next marketing campaign. W