

Why art is a tool for hope

JR

[Why Art is a Tool for Hope.](#)

PARAGRAPH 1

00:00

Wow, wow, people. You know, actually, I love people because my work is about people. It's actually about bringing people together. I'm an artist. I mean, until I found a real job, but now it looks like it's getting pretty serious.

00:16

(Laughter)

PARAGRAPH 2

00:18

But, you know, I also love walls. And I know that walls are supposed to divide us, but I think I've found a way to use walls to bring us together. And I've tried this in different places. This was in Israel, Palestine, 15 years ago, where, with my friend Marco, I took photos of Israeli and Palestinian doing the same job and then pasted them on Israeli city and Palestinian city, and people couldn't even recognize who is who. This was in the favelas of Brazil. Faces of women on the hills of the community.

00:48

(Applause)

PARAGRAPH 3

00:50

Often the [first target](#) of the violence that is happening there. This is a local museum we have in Paris, it's called the Louvre. I don't know if you've heard about it, but I thought I'd give it a shout out. And with 400 people and paper and glue, we wheat-pasted the entire plazas to make the pyramid ten times bigger. This was at the border between Mexico and US. Thank you.

01:15

(Applause and cheers)

PARAGRAPH 4

01:18

Kikito, the little kid, is one year old, and he lives in the little house you see on the top left of the image. I just wonder, at his age, what is his perspective on the wall?

01:30

You know, each time I do a project, I wonder: Can art change the world? And I never really know how a project starts. Couple years ago, I was making breakfast and a friend of mine called me.

01:42

Friend Saul, he says, "JR, you love walls. Why don't you do a project in prison?"

01:48

I was like, you know, I was just, "Dude, you know, I would do it, but it's too much paperwork administrative, bureaucracy. Plus, I've been arrested 15 times, they don't want me in there."

PARAGRAPH 5

01:58

And he was like, "I know, bro, but you love walls so much, what you would do in there. If you could do it, what could you do?"

02:05

I was like, "OK, you know what?" I had an idea. If I wanted to finish my poached eggs and my, you know, French toast before it gets cold, I had to get rid of him. So I told him, "You know what, I'll paste the entire prison."

02:19

He was like, "Wow, that's amazing." He hung up the phone, I thought I'd never hear from him for two decades.

02:25

He called his friend Scott, who was like, "What's up?"

02:27

Saul is like, "I spoke to JR, he's down to do a project in prison."

PARAGRAPH 6

02:30

Scott's like, "That's amazing, let me call the governor." Hung up the phone, called the governor.

02:35

Governor was like, "Who's this JR?"

02:37

"He does black and white, and, you know, he takes photos of people, he records their story ..."

02:43

"I'm sorry, I've never heard of it."

02:44

"Yes, there's very large [murals](#)."

02:46

And the governor was like, "Wait, wait, wait. Before I was the governor, I was in a mural. There were 1,300 people, each one of them recorded their story, and I was one of them. Is that the same artist?"

02:59

The guy said, "Yes, that's the same artist."

03:02

"Give him [full clearance](#) for every prison in the state of California."

03:05

(Laughter and applause)

03:06

Calls me back. Next thing you know, I'm on Google Earth, and there's 35 prisons. I'm looking at them and I'm like, well, first of all, I'm a [wallpaper man](#). I cannot paste if I don't have my clear surface. So that doesn't work, that doesn't work, that doesn't work. The yard is made of sand and grass. I cannot do it. I know nothing about prisons. So then I see this one and I'm like, "Wait, can we zoom in this one?" I'm like, "Oh, actually, you know what? The yard here in the center looks like it's concrete. I could work on that."

PARAGRAPH 7

03:35

"Look, JR, that's a supermax security prison." It's called Tehachapi, it's actually in the top five of the most violent prisons.

03:43

I was like, "That will do it."

03:44

The next day, we flew there. We arrived there, and of course, you know, it's not that easy to get there. It's like fences, electric fences, walls. And you add more walls and more people that check your IDs. I get all the way to the yard. And it looked like some army guy with [bulletproof jackets](#) and [heavily armed](#) who say, "Alright, this is going to be very simple. There's some people waiting for you in a gymnasium. We gathered some [inmates](#). You cannot approach them, you cannot touch them. You can sit at the chair that we designed for you, and we're going to surround the area of the gymnasium."

04:15

That sounds fun. I enter the room, and we do this thing in France, I don't know if you have that, but you shake people's hand, you know? [So I started shaking people's hands](#), "Hello, how are you? My name is JR. What's your name?" And go around the table, and then I sat. And I spoke with them. A lot of them have been there since they were teenagers, some of them even from the age of 13. And I've never seen anything like it. And so I told them about my art and about the idea.

04:43

And they asked me a question, they said, "But what is the purpose of your art?"

PARAGRAPH 8

04:48

Well, you know, that's a good question. I don't know if I can answer before, you know, trying a project. So I explained them an idea, and I said, "Wait, before we start anything, I just want you to know, if there's anyone here in this room that by being in this project, you might offend some

of your victims outside, I'm not your guy. I'm going to get too much attention for you. If I were you, don't participate in this project."

PARAGRAPH 9

05:14

Six or seven guys stood up and left the room. I was like, "Alright." So we kept on going and I started photographing them. Very simple, it's just a small part of the process. I'm not really a photographer. That's just one part that I use, and I get to meet them and talk with them. And each of them started explaining me their story, where they grew up, where they come from, how many years, some of them spent decades in this prison.

PARAGRAPH 10

05:37

And the thing is that, I told them, I said, "Look, this photo is nothing. I need you to go in the next room. I'm going to leave a mic there. And I want you to record your story from the beginning. I want to understand, you have to talk like, if you're throwing a bottle in the ocean, I want to understand where you come from. And then what brought you to make that crime that led you to prison. And if you changed, explain how you changed and why."

PARAGRAPH 11

06:04

They all went, some stayed for 10 minutes, some stayed for 20, 30 minutes. Some of them were crying in that place.

06:11

Then I went back to my studio and that's what we do. We print strips of paper like a giant puzzle, so we have to combine it together. It's all just paper and glue. And then we combine them by numbers, and then we went back there. And we started bringing everybody in the yard. And we started pasting. Everyone from every gang, every race, participated.

PARAGRAPH 12

06:31

Now, the thing is, we're still in a supermax security prison. So the guards were like, "Look, we love you with your paper and stuff, but we're going to count everything you brought in, and we're going to make sure you leave with everything out. So every hour we're going to stop this whole project and make sure there's not one scissors missing, one brush, one, you know, bucket, anything."

PARAGRAPH 13

06:52

So we went through the process, and I had planned two to three days to paste the whole thing. Those guys were so motivated, that in literally two or three hours we had done it.

07:03

So I said, "Wait, stop, guys, they're going to bring you back to your cell, give me a second. I'm going to try to get some guards to paste with us."

07:10

And they were like, look, "We love utopianism and stuff, but that's where it stops."

07:14

"No, just give me a second."

PARAGRAPH 14

07:15

So I start going to the guards and I say, "Hey, do you mind participating?" Fifty "no," one guy said "yes." I say, "Cool, come with me. They're going to show you." And then another guard and another guard. And that's where the real walls were falling down, because there's no communication between those guards and the inmates.

07:31

(Applause)

07:35

And you know what? From the floor, it was so big we couldn't see it anyway. You had to send a drone. So remember, again, you're in a supermax security prison. It's geofencing.

07:46

(Laughter)

PARAGRAPH 15

07:47

So we send in the drone, those guys have never seen a drone their whole life, they were more excited about the drone than the whole project. And I was so scared because I was like, "I hope we did the puzzle right. Because if not, it's going to look a bit ugly from up there." And that's what you see from up there.

08:03

(Applause and cheers)

08:13

Thank you.

08:14

The whole yard, all their faces. And when you zoom in, actually, you see the picnic table, you can still see, it looks like a hole, but it's actually an [illusion](#). And you see the guys walking on it.

PARAGRAPH 16

08:25

Now, the craziest part of all of it is because of that crazy permit that I had, I literally walked in without being searched. I had my phone on me. So I started filming in there and posting it on social media. So this guy there was showing me his tattoo on day one. And then the evening, he called his family and they said, "We saw you on JR's Instagram. It's incredible, we see what you guys are doing."

08:51

He was so proud the next day he said, "JR, do you mind me showing my diplomas?"

08:55

They started realizing the [impact](#) of suddenly having a connection with the outside.

08:59

Then this guy showed up. His name is Kevin. You know, when I saw him, I was like, "Whoa." In my life, I'll never have a second chance to ask a guy, hopefully, why he has a fucking swastika on his face.

09:13

(Laughter)

PARAGRAPH 17

09:15

And so I ask him, and he was like, "Oh, this?" Almost like he forgot about it. He was like, "I did this as a gang thing when I went in prison. But now, if I could, I would remove it."

09:25

I was like, "OK, do you mind if I take a photo and I share it?"

09:28

He's like, "Yeah, sure."

09:29

I share that photo. Now, as you can imagine, on social media, a lot of people were as shocked and offended as I was. But a lot of people were like, "That's strange, because that doesn't connect with the beauty in his eyes and the humanity in him."

PARAGRAPH 18

09:43

So I went back to him and I said, "Look, Kevin, there's this thing called social media. I know you've been here too long and you don't know about this, but people are writing comments, I'm going to read them to you. And I think some of them you should answer. So we started talking, and I did many and many videos and asking him again and again, and he responded and he went deeper and deeper. And it started a chain of people who were like, "Let's get this tattoo out of his face."

10:07

So now before we revealed the image that you saw, I didn't want to throw it to the world like that.

10:14

For now, only the [inmates](#) and I have seen it. We started an app where you can actually go in, it's totally free, and you can go and [click](#) on any face and hear their story for as much as they want.

10:25

(Applause)

PARAGRAPH 19

10:31

I wonder, you know, I've seen it. I saw people telling me that they heard story, and like a [podcast](#). But I wonder, how would they feel about it? You know, I wanted the [feedback](#) from them.

10:42

So I got a [permit](#) to go back into prison. And this time I said, let me work on some more walls, I'll find an idea. So I go back in there and I started working on the walls, but it was really, [the excuse](#) was like, I need to speak to you guys. So I said, "What happened, guys?"

10:56

They were like, "Well, what do you mean, what happened?"

10:59

I was like, "I was on the outside, I couldn't speak to you guys. What was the [impact](#) inside?"

11:03

"Oh, the impact inside is pretty simple. Let me tell you for myself, I mean, my daughter never visited me in 14 years. And now she sat in her bedroom, and she listened to my audio, and now she sees me every week." He says, "You can ask whoever you want of those guys here, and they'll tell you the same story."

11:20

(Applause)

PARAGRAPH 20

11:23

And he told me another thing happened. "Is that [the guards](#) started listening to our stories. They treat us differently now."

11:32

Then we started seeing the walls falling down. So I left a little [souvenir](#) in the courtyard. I was like, "Let me make one more wall disappear before I go." So we pasted the mountains from behind the wall on the wall. And it's still there, actually.

11:46

(Applause)

PARAGRAPH 21

11:51

This one is still in level four, which is the [supermax security prison](#). And they told me in winter it becomes all snowy. And so you actually don't tell the difference between the reality and the wall.

12:02

Now, Kevin was still in prison, so I visited him again. And something had changed in him. He was already helping others, and, you know, you could tell that he almost had forgotten about his tattoo, even if it was still there, because you cannot remove tattoos in prison. So I bought him a book, and I told him, "Look, there's a swastika on the cover, I thought you would like it." And he laughed. But I said, "No, seriously, this is our friend, Art Spiegelman, who wrote it, and he told the story about his family in the Holocaust."

PARAGRAPH 22

12:33

And so that night he went and read the book. And he was really moved. He called his mom and he said, "Mom, those French people brought me this book that talks about [the Holocaust](#)."

12:44

And she said, "But you stupid [moron](#). Your family was from Poland. They were hiding Jews. They died in [Auschwitz](#) because of protecting them. And you go in prison and do this on your face?" He was in shock.

PARAGRAPH 23

12:58

Couple years later, which is a couple months ago, he came out. Like many others from the project, almost all of them got moved to a [lower-security prison](#), and one third of them got freed because of having good grades and notes by the guards after the project. So Kevin went out, and the first thing he did was to go up that hill that he looked at for 17 years, to look down at the prison that he was staying in. And then the second thing, as I promised him, I took him to a doctor to remove his tattoo. And the [session](#) started with the laser, and it's very painful. And at the end of it, the doctor removed the laser and she told him, "Well, who's better than a Jewish doctor to remove your swastika?"

13:46

(Laughter and applause)

13:53

And that's him now.

PARAGRAPH 24

13:54

(Applause and cheers)

14:01

You know, we really tried to bring him here. But his [parole officer](#), who is actually really nice, he said "JR, [you're pushing too much](#). He's not going to Canada. Sorry about this." But he knows I'm here talking about it.

14:14

You know, I want to use art as a [bridge](#) to make people talk to each other. I'm not an [activist](#), I'm just an artist. I don't try to tell people what to think. I just try to make them think. And I really see art, to me, it's like, it's in the process. That's what's important. And after this whole project, after everything I showed you, what [shook](#) them, what [struck](#) them the most, is that I shook their hand. So at the end, they even asked me for a hug.

PARAGRAPH 25

14:43

Now I remember their first question, which was: What is the purpose of your art? Well, art can change things, but can it change the world? Or can it change a man? Before you answer that question, think, at some point in your life, have you changed? And if yes, if you did, why can't they?

15:06

Thank you.

15:09

(Applause and cheers)

15:22

Helen Walters: That's amazing, you're amazing. You also just got back from Ukraine, and I wanted to show us just another piece of your work.

PARAGRAPH 26

15:33

JR: Oh yeah, that was in Ukraine. The biggest city in the west side of Ukraine is called Lviv. And a friend of mine took that photo at the border, he sent it to me, I printed it 150 feet long. We rolled it as a [tarp](#), walked through the border with it. It's actually easy to go that way, you know, to enter Ukraine. So they were like, "Oh, you're going to go this way? Sure." And then we drove to, you know, I met some people on Instagram, and they came and picked me up in their car. And then we gathered hundreds of people. We wanted to show Putin's planes who they were shooting out.

16:08

(Applause)

PARAGRAPH 27

16:11

That little girl is actually safe. When she got photographed, she was coming out of the country. So she's now in Warsaw, and she's OK. And since then, actually, we're moving this image all around Europe. So while TED was happening in the last four days, the image was in Berlin, Dusseldorf, Venice this morning. And then it will keep traveling and each time, each place, people are gathering by themselves and opening it up.

16:37

HW: That is amazing, JR, thank you.

16:38

JR: Thank you. (Applause)