









# STREET ART NEW YORK

JAIME ROJO AND STEVEN P. HARRINGTON

WITH A FOREWORD BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

2000–2010



**PRESTEL**

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**A**s far as works of art go, this one was technically crude: an unlawful doodle of a robot in blue ink, one metallic arm held up as if saying hello. He resided on the side of a fire department call box somewhere on the downtown end of Lexington Avenue—about a foot tall, with a hasty, crooked smile and a pair of sleepy eyes that suggested he might be stoned. For years I saw him almost daily as I made my way around the neighborhood. (I lived in the area then.) And, everyday, without fail, he would dutifully greet me with a wave of his wrench-shaped hand. There were days I felt compelled to wave back.

This funny little creature wasn't the most eye-popping piece of street art I'd ever seen. It was neither elaborate, nor drenched with layers of socio-political meaning. It was a simple gesture, by an anonymous artist, yet it had the power to draw my attention on a daily basis, to turn a slab of dull municipal furniture into a dynamic piece of sculpture. In recent years, as street art has gone mainstream—assiduously documented in all manner of media, showcased in galleries, and acquired by museums—it can be easy to forget about the visceral reaction that comes from simply stumbling upon a piece of art on the street. Mummies and men made of sticks crowd doorways and alleys and the infinite nooks and crannies of New York City's grimy infrastructure, ready to greet and surprise during the course of an average, lost-in-thought day. In some spots, it's as if the city's walls are engaged in constant conversation with its citizens.

If street art has the power to induce reaction with its puking monsters, floating slugs, and silly sayings (*Fuck No Evil*), it also has the power to transform. A rusty metal panel becomes a textured backdrop to an oversized woodblock print by Swoon. A dingy brick wall highlights the nuclear colors of Judith Supine's hallucinogenic collages. The abstract works of artists such as MOMO and Aakash Nihalani highlight the city's boxy forms. And all of the overlooked elements of urban life—electrical pipes and garbage cans—are scrambled and reinterpreted by the brothers Skewville, whose three-dimensional sculptures have been found illicitly bolted, drilled, and nailed to urban walls.

These pieces, along with the many others featured in this book, remind us to open our eyes to the architecture we've stopped perceiving. New York City is a jumble of concrete and bricks and aluminum siding. Spend enough

time here and it's as if the structures begin to fade into the background. Old brownstones, graceful Beaux-Arts apartment buildings, and humble row houses all disappear as the eye becomes trained on more immediate concerns, like doggie doo, errant cyclists, and any signage advertising a two-for-one beer special.

Absent-mindedly round a corner, however, and come face to face with a well-placed, wildly colorful piece of graffiti and all of a sudden you're forced to really examine the city: the color of the walls, the texture of the bricks, the shape of the buildings, and the color of the sky around them. Even the most inane scrawl—a giant claw reaching along the entire side of a structure—can turn a monotonous row of concrete warehouses into a fantastical oversized comic book. Vandalism is often equated with the destruction of architecture. I'd like to argue that it can give it new life.

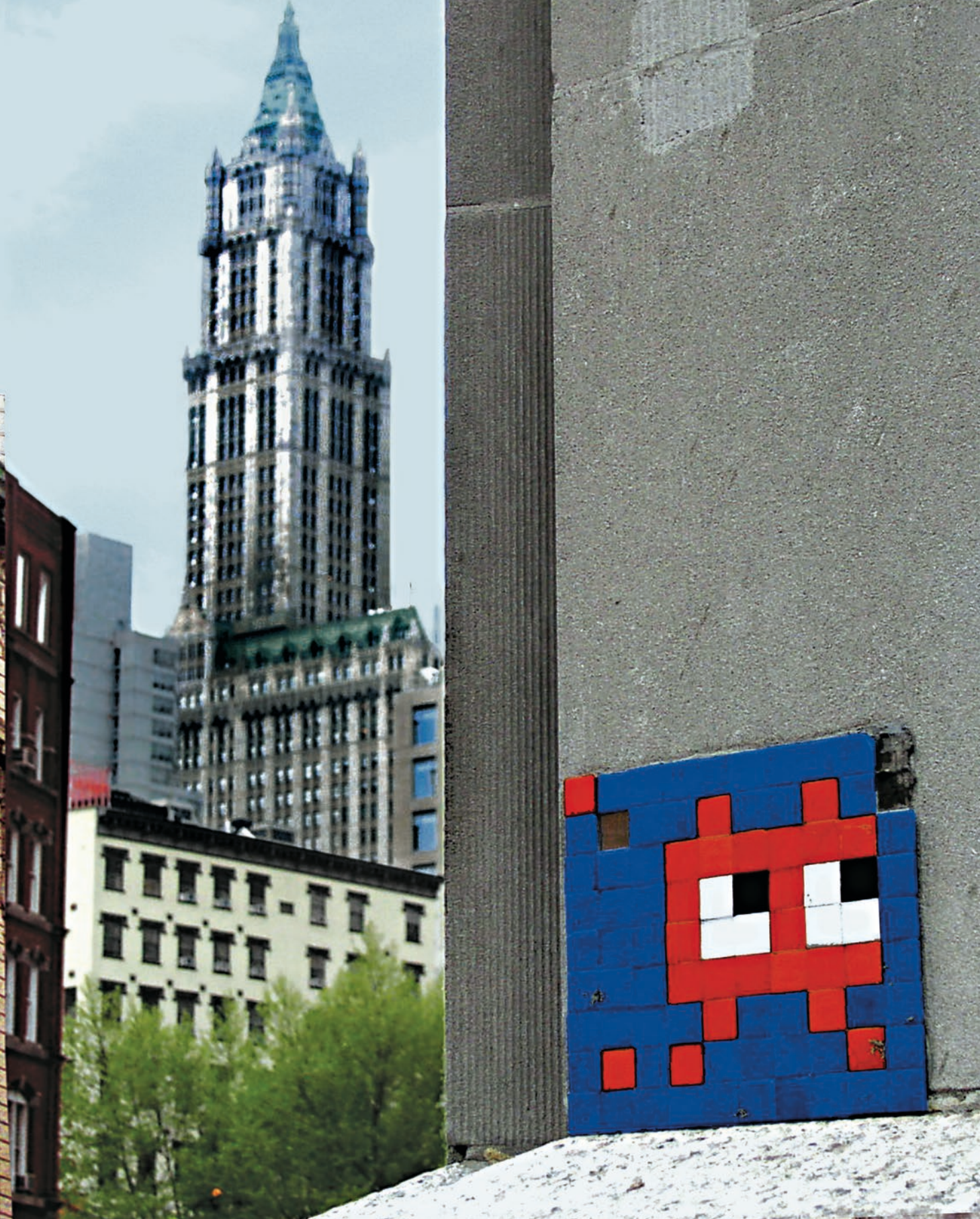
Ultimately, it's this energy that Jaime Rojo and Steven P. Harrington are celebrating in this book. The images you see before you have been culled from Rojo's personal archive of more than 12,000 film and digital photographs, taken throughout New York City over the course of seven years. Interestingly, it is a project that has its roots in another. Rojo, a devout photographer, was in the midst of shooting a series on abandoned furniture (a subject that still interests him as an artist), when he came across a small stencil of a man with a horse's head on a surfboard, done by the Brooklyn-based collective Faile. It was, he recalls, a moment of discovery. This was art that was all around him, yet he had never really taken it in. From that moment on, he chronicled what he found on the street: graffiti tags, paste-ups of giant wrestlers, mosaics of alien invaders, stickers of suggestive ladies, and even delicate trompe l'oeil paintings. In many cases, he had no idea who the artists were, only the visual evidence that they had been there.

*Street Art New York* is a record of these discoveries, the little moments when a piece of art peers at you from a wall and says *Look*. The works are big and small, by artists well-known and not. There are paintings and photographs, collages and stencils. Some have long since been destroyed, others, as I write this, are still living. It's an ongoing dialogue between an observer and the street. To listen, all you have to do is look.

Carolina A. Miranda  
New York, 2010

*Carolina A. Miranda is an arts and urban design columnist at the Los Angeles Times. She has a long-running interest in street art and graffiti and the ways in which these art forms intersect with the urban landscape. She is the winner of the 2017 Rabkin Prize for Visual Arts Journalism. Find her on Twitter @cmonstah.*







IF THIS WAS GRAFFITI  
IT WOULD BE HERE



## LUCKY IN NEW YORK

We've been fortunate to witness the explosion of street art in New York.

If Walt Whitman were alive today, maybe he would be a photographer or street artist, capturing or being captured in images. The great American poet would wander the city, as we have, without a destination. It was during such an aimless walk, camera in hand, that Jaime first took photos of the new conversation on the streets by a population of artists who were no longer looking for a gallery but intent on creating one of their own. With roots in graffiti and inspired by 1980s artists including Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jenny Holzer, and Richard Hambleton, this evolution of contemporary art broadened and began to take shape as "Street Art."

New York has always been a magnet for artists of all disciplines. With D.I.Y. spirit in full effect this past decade, many young artists simply took it upon themselves to rewrite the rules and make their art for the street. The resulting body of work bucks the lettering tradition of graffiti and the established gallery system at the same time by placing fine art in the "gallery of the street," in whatever style or school, under whatever influence, in any material and by any technique desired.

Jaime's collection of images began to grow in the autumn of 2001. Photographing discarded chairs left outdoors for a show at a Brooklyn gallery, he started to see curious visual traces left by anonymous artists. These were pasted, glued, bolted, or painted in hidden places and obvious ones. It was as though the street had started talking. (Whitman surely would have captured the words.) As a photographer, Jaime captured images, including the ones in this book.

In the years since then, it feels like one explosion has followed another, and the artists have taken their very personal messages to the street to meet and challenge viewers, including ourselves. We experience the art in a very personal way. We hope you are moved too, that you are inspired by the art presented here and this celebration of the creative spirit alive and well on the street. May you be as lucky in New York.

Steven P. Harrington and Jaime Rojo  
New York, 2010













