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For Bunny Luisa Uzzell Edwards

# ROA CODEX

MMXIX



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by *RJ Rushmore*

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# KEEP IT NATURAL

## RJ Rushmore

RJ Rushmore (b. 1991 in Chicago, USA) studied political science at Haverford College. He has been involved in contemporary art as a writer, curator, photographer and arts administrator since 2008. With a focus on street art, graffiti and public art, RJ facilitates and promotes ambitious art outdoors, in galleries and online. The founder of the street art blog *Vandalog* and the co-founder of the culture-jamming campaign Art in Ad Places, he has worked at the L.I.S.A. Project NYC, Mural Arts Philadelphia, and Creative Time. In addition to authoring and editing three books, he has contributed to publications including *Hyperallergic* and the *Saatchi Gallery Magazine*. He is currently based in New York City.



ROA is as much a project as a person. The pseudo-anonymous man behind the ROA moniker got his start in graffiti at age 13, painting many different names and characters in as many styles. It took well over a decade to land on what would become ROA. The timing could not have been better.

The international street art scene had been developing largely underground since the early 1990s, but it entered the mainstream in the mid- to late 2000s. There was a shift. Real estate developers were curious about using murals to decorate their buildings. Speculative collectors were dropping millions to snatch up paintings by Banksy. A handful of museums were even expressing an interest, with groundbreaking exhibitions at the TATE Modern, ICA Boston, Bristol Museum, and elsewhere. Ostensibly rebellious street artists, whose first galleries had been piss-soaked alleyways, were selling paintings in white cubes and licensing their work to brands like Nike. London, where I was living at the time, was Europe's hotspot for this new era of professionalized street art (sometimes rebranded by galleries and auction houses as "urban art"), and something in the air suggested that things were only going to get bigger.

Seeing these new opportunities, many street artists became muralists, effectively leaving the illegal work behind. And why not? When you could either risk arrest putting up wheatpastes that might not last a day or paint permanent murals with materials all paid for by the wall owners, who could resist?

Certainly, one could mourn the loss of that little rebel community and its radical potential, but who had time? Artists were being flown around the world on "spraycations." Flickr (and later Instagram) was giving fans immediate access to new street art and murals were going up across the globe. Banksy was nominated for an Oscar for a film that focused on this very question of what is lost when street artist becomes a legitimate career path. Artists built their lives and livelihoods around the gallery system, an ever-growing list of legal street art festivals, and designing advertisements for the very brands that their early work derided. A formula even developed for professional street artists: fly to a new city, slap whatever you find in your sketchbook up onto the wall, and immediately translate that mural-turned-personal-billboard into a gallery-ready canvas.

ROA was almost perfectly positioned to get sucked in with the rest of them. But he found another way. He rode the wave, but never got swept up in it.

A pessimist, glancing only briefly, might dismiss a piece by ROA as a shallow crowd-pleaser, a big and technically

well-painted animal. It's impressive, but is it more than that? Take a closer look. ROA treats each surface he paints like a space to investigate, play with, and fit his creatures into. The technical perfection of his painting belies an underlying resourcefulness with simple tools. The animals are matched to their location, with rats in New York City and elephants in Bangkok. There are dark and funny messages, the beauty of both life and death, universal metaphors, inside jokes, and occasional violence, but always in ways that honor the animals and the spaces where they are painted. The surface-level premise of "paint animals really big" is a hook that allows him to blend in with the other globetrotting muralists of his generation, but everything beyond that separates ROA from the pack.

Early pieces under the ROA identity include a saber-toothed tiger and even a few dinosaurs. But as the project developed, there was a crucial shift. As ROA put it to me, he moved from painting "the cool animals" to painting animals "that nobody gave a fuck about." This differentiated ROA from a history of graffiti writers painting hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual, or simply hyper-pop characters as decor to draw further attention to their names. A T-rex smashing through the wall? Sure – that'll catch some eyes. A scientific diagram of a bird's internal organs? No thanks. From the moment he painted a dead pig splayed out on the wall of an abandoned former slaughterhouse, ROA was resisting the cookie-cutter formulas of graffiti and street art. <sup>p.13</sup>

Like many of ROA's early fans, I was first introduced to his work online. The graffiti blog *Ekosystem* started posting photos of ROA's work in the summer of 2007, which is probably where I came across them. Naively wrapped up in the fame game of street art as I was back then, I remember thinking, "Who is this amazing artist? And why are they painting mostly in abandoned spaces outside of Belgian cities that, frankly, I have never heard of? They should be decorating the most coveted walls in street art meccas like New York City, London, and Los Angeles."

ROA's first glimpse of wider recognition came with a visit to New York City in early 2009. When on that trip he painted a few murals in Brooklyn, it was like he burst onto the scene fully formed, and the city's street art community embraced him. Around that same time, I wrote about ROA on *Vandalog*, a street art blog that I ran. I called him "my favorite artist you've never heard of." But people were starting to pay attention. Within a year, ROA would also become a favorite of much more widely read art blogs including *Wooster Collective*, *Brooklyn Street Art*, and *Unurth*.

In the fall of 2009, ROA finally made a much-anticipated visit to London. In those early years, ROA was self-funding his travels and his muralism, maybe showing up in town with a few leads, but mostly just an eagerness to paint. ROA had

given me a heads up about the visit, so I found him a wall, a modest bland rectangle. He made it work, but clearly I didn't quite understand ROA's brilliance yet.

Out on his own in the East London hipster enclave of Shoreditch during that same visit, ROA scouted a house with a wall that he could make something of. Sketchbook in hand, he knocked on the front door. Some of the tenants answered, and ROA, who could be quite shy in those days, explained the situation: he was an artist, and he wanted to paint a squirrel on their house. He pulled out his sketchbook and showed examples. This would cost them nothing, and it would only take a few hours. The wall had been tagged up and wheatpasted for years. Nobody had ever asked. Now, here was a friendly guy with an offer to create something unique for their home. Although they didn't own the building, they did live there and liked the idea. The residents said go for it. That night while they slept, ROA got to work.

In ROA logic, the squirrel was a perfect choice. Although the squirrel did not *fill* the entire wall, it *fit* the wall. The animal is positioned and sized just so, with its tail wrapping around the street sign and its face glancing inquisitively at the plants on a little rooftop garden. ROA's mural encouraged you to consider that building and its surroundings with a fresh set of eyes. Despite being partially obscured by a large tree, which actually makes some sense for a squirrel even as it emphasizes the mural's significant scale, it was an instant neighborhood icon. <sup>p.65</sup>

For all the opportunities that would come later, chances to fly around the world with access to endless supplies of paint and 80-foot boom lifts that would allow him to float up and down a wall for days, I think that moment in Shoreditch shows ROA in his purest form: knocking on doors with a sketchbook, ready to work with paint rollers on extension poles or up on a rickety ladder, because a spot is calling to him.

ROA's resourcefulness was honed by his time in the graffiti community, where writers are trained to work within punishing limitations and hack together solutions. ROA takes that to an extreme: white primer, a paint roller, black spray paint, a ladder, and an extension pole. Even as he shot towards street art superstardom, ROA was always ready to be creative with his tools, such as when he developed a way to put a spray can on an extension pole, extending his reach by 10 feet or more. Wielded with a combination of creativity, ingenious hacks, and technical abilities, those simple supplies are more than enough for ROA to do his thing.

In the summer of 2011, ROA and I found ourselves together in Atlanta, Georgia for Living Walls, a world-class mural program that was putting on its second annual street art festival and conference. It was August, which is not the time

of year to be spending hours and hours outdoors in that city, but more than two dozen artists were out in the heat painting murals.

When Living Walls failed to source a wall for ROA, he had to find one on his own. He got permission to paint a building that a good artist would find easy and a great artist would hate. A good artist might look at the spot and think, "Oh, I'll just stick to ground level. With a ladder, I can reach the top of that deep purple paint, and I'll use that as a guide to frame my rectangular mural." A great artist with enough experience and ego to want to go as big as possible might think, "I want to fill this space, but this wall has windows in odd places, a fire escape, and a ghost sign. And it's not even flat. Can't do it. This is a mess."

But ROA is more than a good artist or a great artist: he's a clever artist. Thinking back to a fallen heron that he had painted in his do-it-yourself days back in the Belgian city of Ghent, ROA developed a solution. <sup>p.23</sup> He used all of those limitations, plus a combination of homemade tools which allowed him to avoid renting an expensive boom lift, to paint something that only made sense on that particular wall: an alligator on its back, tail wrapping up the wall to rest on the fire escape in a way that keeps the fading "Star Hotel" sign intact. <sup>p.228-229</sup> A good artist might have stayed within the natural human-scale frame on that wall and a great artist might have aimed for massive scale only to be stymied by the wall's unique features, but this clever artist broke through public art's usual boundaries of scale and frame in a way that honors the site.

I think that's how he got away with painting a (possibly dead?) alligator. If someone had taken a poll of the neighborhood in advance of ROA's arrival and asked what should be painted on the old Star Hotel, I doubt "giant alligator on its back" would have gotten many votes. But now that it is there, can you imagine anything else? Even at such a huge scale, the alligator does not intrude. It fits right in.

When I asked ROA how he selects which animals he paints, he told me, "Painting on the street is about giving people what they need, not what they want." It has never been about choosing easy animals, and it can be unpredictable how people respond. Some neighbors can fall in love with a mural showing a rotting buffalo corpse, but ROA paints a seemingly innocuous tortoise and suddenly the complaints start rolling in. Sometimes, the controversy is completely out of ROA's control, as was the case in 2012 when some Rochester, New York residents mistook ROA's mural of two sleeping bears for two rats involved in a certain sexual act. <sup>p.222-223</sup> Sometimes, a stack of sleeping or perhaps dead animals on an epic scale is just right for an urban center that otherwise feels devoid of non-human life. The pile serves as a monumental reminder, without the sugarcoating that murals often incorporate, that

we build cities for humans, and humans alone. ROA gives the people what they need, but sometimes they see what they want to see. Such is the risk that he runs every time he picks up a spray can. Nonetheless, ROA continues to push his brave and unexpected choices.

By the time ROA arrived in The Gambia in 2011 for the Wide Open Walls festival, he was a well-established figure in the international muralism community, and as he told me, “I earned the right to paint my elephant.” Was ROA growing an elephant-sized ego? Not at all. In another setting, an elephant might be considered one of “cool animals” that ROA intentionally avoids painting, but The Gambia’s wild elephant population had been hunted out of existence nearly a century prior. These *were* the animals that “nobody gave a fuck about,” at least not anyone with the power to stop the killing. That’s the context in which ROA was finally ready to paint this particular animal. He had earned his right to paint an elephant by proving himself with other animals, but also by waiting for a setting where it would mean something. Ignoring any temptation to paint the biggest and baddest elephant around, ROA painted a sleeping elephant with a fully outstretched trunk, and its tail tied to the wall. <sup>p.174-175</sup> The evolution from 2007, when ROA painted a caricatured rhinoceros breaking through a wall in Belgium, to this subtle masterpiece, painted with more “bucket paint” and less spray than usual, exemplifies ROA’s journey from graffiti writer to one-of-a-kind public artist.

Going far beyond painting an animal to suit a given location, ROA can build moments of tension in response to the shape or features of a given spot, an idea hinted at in that Shoreditch squirrell and later perfected. For Fundacja Urban Forms’ 2013 festival in Łódź, Poland, ROA painted three weasels playing with a treasure trove of stolen eggs, the opening moment of a weasels’ bacchanal in a scene both silly and dark. <sup>p.98-99</sup> Before enjoying the feast, the weasels balance themselves and the eggs like they’ve paused a delicate game of pachinko. Are the eggs about to fall and break? Will the lower weasel catch them all like a juggler? One wrong move, and it all falls apart. Part of the reason the piece works is that ROA built the tension into the already existing features of the wall. Yes, he painted the weasels, but he also worked with the space he was given, including the building next door and the chimney up top, to create the moment. Once again, by playing with the wall, ROA added a specificity and an intimacy to the work that treating a wall like a blank canvas cannot match.

There’s a similar moment in a 2016 mural in Bangkok, Thailand, a rare return to elephants in another profound combination of silliness and darkness. <sup>p.144-145</sup> At first glance, these two elephants, squished between awnings and one completely upside down, elicit a smile. It just looks funny. The elephants are out of place. How long can they possibly hold this precarious pose before they tumble? Will they bring the

whole building down with them? Taken another way, these living beings are impossibly pressed into the only space available on the wall, echoing the loss of Asian elephant habitat that contributes to their endangered status. We build apartment blocks, and elephants face a squeeze. The wall is too small a cage in the big city, where these creatures might have once roamed but clearly no longer belong. When they tumble and bring down the building with them, is that our doing? Probably. And that whole story exists in the mural, thanks to the tension created by ROA, in collaboration with the wall.

When ROA makes work for the gallery, he manages to build a similar partnership between himself and whatever city he is in. Nothing is painted in advance. A month or so before opening night, ROA comes to town and sets up his temporary studio. What comes next, ROA thinks of as like a dance. First comes the scavenging. Through a process of dumpster diving, searching through abandoned buildings, and sheer luck, ROA assembles his base materials: doors, cabinets, desks, coffee tables ... and other locally sourced pieces of metal, wood, and glass. Whatever he finds, possibilities abound. Finally comes the process of painting, where he generally sticks to animals that live in the region. In contrast to his murals, where ROA has to work with the form of the wall he’s given, the process for a gallery installation is a creative opportunity to build new structures, like a custom cabinet with doors and hinges that perfectly match up to the shape of an animal. With this approach, ROA sets himself a site-specific challenge with every exhibition, one that is one part chance and one part a test of his ingenuity with carpentry and animal forms.

ROA’s gallery installations center on exploration. ROA explores a city, researching its culture, its hidden nooks and crannies, its animal life, and the local community’s relationship with the natural world, to develop an exhibition on-site. The final result is a similar opportunity for his audience. Most ROA exhibitions tend towards being immersive experiences, visitors meant to feel like they are in an abandoned building full of things left behind. Sometimes that’s exactly where the shows take place, like ROA’s *Defragmentation* installation in a disused Stockholm metro station. Curious visitors can delve deeper with individual works, walking around mirrored pieces to see every perspective and playing with each interactive sculpture’s possible combinations to create new compositions, their own opportunity to explore. The works are three dimensional, with a new discovery possible at every angle.

But why so much death in the gallery works? ROA can get downright gruesome. Turn the panels on a ROA sculpture one way, and you have majestic creatures. Flip them around, and you may find those same animals hunted, skinned, or left to rot. For *Carrion*, his 2012 solo exhibition at Backwoods Gallery in Melbourne, ROA went a step further, filling the gallery with actual rotting animals, specifically roadkill. <sup>p.329</sup>

The answer, at least in part, goes back again to exploration. When man explores, we destroy environments. We hunt for the hell of it, introduce invasive species to suit our aesthetic preferences, pollute rivers, and build concrete jungles, all activities that ROA's gallery installations touch on. Often, ROA paints the Anthropocene: this contemporary era where man, driven by greed and arrogance, is driving other species (and perhaps ourselves) to extinction. ROA has said that he wants his work to confront the viewer with the nature of the beast, and the beast is man. However, ROA is not grim. For every painting of a tortured or starved animal, there's another with an alligator egg or a pregnant deer. In spite of man, the animals press on.

ROA's interest in modern man's destructive streak was perhaps most clearly brought into focus at *Dominant Species*, his 2012 exhibition at 941 Geary Gallery in San Francisco. <sup>P.15</sup> At the center of *Dominant Species*, ROA built a Unabomber-esque shack accompanied by a small shooting range. On the walls of the gallery, visitors were confronted with paintings and sculptures that could be understood as remnants of the shack-builder's life. Who was this man who hunted birds, caged beavers, laid rat poison, generated absurd amounts of trash, and ran over armadillos? What a mess. Oh wait, that's us. Dominant to a fault.

ROA's approach to Art in the Streets, the 2011 groundbreaking street art exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, was somewhat less dark, but equally notable. There, ROA pushed the boundaries of what might be considered a mural. He began with a fairly straightforward (though long) wall inside the museum. He could have just painted a two-dimensional mural there and called it a day. Instead, he mounted 10 doors on hinges across the wall, painting both sides of each door to line up with the menagerie painted on the base wall. So much more than a static mural, this piece could be displayed on literally over 1,000 ways, and the exhibition's 200,000+ visitors were invited to collaborate with ROA by adjusting the doors to their liking.

In the gallery, ROA takes the opportunity to go beyond what might be technically possible on the street, whether that's in a single painting with fine detail or across an entire immersive installation with interactive elements. For ROA, the gallery is anything but a white cube for hanging canvases. Like with a wall, each gallery is a space to inhabit and utilize for its unique potential.

Returning to the particulars of the street art world for one last anecdote, it is a culture that blurs the lines between artist and fan. Like touring musicians, muralists have to develop communities of friends in each city they visit. After a long day on the wall, an artist usually needs some combination of a cold beer, a slice of pizza, a joint, and a couch to crash on. And the fans are there to help. Nothing shows ROA's appreciation

for those support networks, and the street art community in general, better than a painting of a dead parakeet on the side of a doctor's office.

In New York City, ROA could count on the dedicated graffiti photographers Peter Carroll, aka Laserburners aka Pet Bird, and Katherine Lorimer, aka Luna Park, for all of those essentials that a muralist needs. He crashed at their place numerous times, and they once waited out a blizzard there together. When Carroll passed away suddenly in 2015, the graffiti and street art communities were devastated, but it was not until nearly two years later that ROA would fully be able to pay his respects.

In the summer of 2017, ROA was back in NYC and staying at the Bed Stuy Artist Residency, a then-fledgling residency program started by two street art fans with an eagerness to open their apartment to artists. He got an opportunity to paint a smallish wall in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, about the size that a graffiti writer might paint a standard-sized piece on. Not the usual ROA spot at all, but it turned out to be just a few blocks from Carroll and Lorimer's home. Carroll had written graffiti under the moniker PET BIRD, and he peppered the city with stickers featuring a black-and-white photo of a parakeet. ROA decided to dedicate the wall to his friend, and as he told the blog *Brooklyn Street Art* at the time, "I could paint a regular parakeet – something pretty – but that's not me and anyway Peter would fucking like this!" I agree, and now Williamsburg is home to a mural of a dead parakeet and a "PET BIRD RIP" inscription that must seem to outsiders like a bit of an odd choice. <sup>P.211</sup> But graffiti is painted to be read by insiders. That bird is a graffiti piece disguised as a mural. Those of us who know, we fucking like it.

As much as the street art community has changed in the last decade, ROA has remained wonderfully consistent in that he has stayed true to the ROA project. From the start, he decided not to do commercial work, join the social media rat race, or paint just because someone asked him to, which ROA tells me makes it easy to say yes to good projects and no to bad ones. Everything was decided before opportunity even came knocking. As he put it to me, "I keep it natural. I do the things I *would* do, not the things I *could* do."

An unfortunate amount of street art, graffiti, and muralism going up today is a crass marketing effort. Whether the work is marketing a real estate developer's gentrification dreams, a fast food joint, or an artist's own gallery practice, a mural is often not about the wall or the neighborhood. At the same time, the unique challenges that come with working on the street have been smoothed out by the boom lifts, paint sponsors, lawyers, and the overall professionalization of street art. Even while ROA has taken advantage of the growing opportunities to paint and make a living doing what he loves, he has resisted the trends that risk hollowing out the culture we love.

ROA gives me faith in street art and public art, and the *ROA Codex* in your hands can be a guide in more ways than one. The animals and their relationships with the cities in which they are painted are rightly the focus of this book, but note the undercurrent of ROA's relationship with an evolving street art community. He has forged the path of an artist maintaining his own truth in the face of the professional street art machine. I hope other artists choose to follow ROA's lead: paint when, where, what, and because you want to. Keep it natural.















**I**

**EURASIA**





































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Chapter openers

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