

JIM JOE ENTRANCE

Of all this city's innumerable oddities, the New York Public Library's Picture Collection is surely up there. Housed in a small room within the NYPL's main branch on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, it comprises more than a million unbound printed images—vernacular photographs, magazine clippings, yellowed postcards, diagrams freed from textbooks—sorted into twelve thousand subjects (“Accidents,” “Punishments”), which are more hints than meticulous taxonomies. This trove shares more with a fashion designer's mood board or a teenager's bedroom wall than the rigorous systems of library science.

Artists have long been drawn to the collection's rich, magpie weirdness. Joseph Cornell and Art Spiegelman were regulars. Andy Warhol pocketed hundreds of pictures for himself (entries from “Advertising—Soft Drinks” were found among his possessions). In 2022 the NYPL formalized the relationship, offering fellowships for artists to create an original work using their archive. Last year, the library found an unlikely collaborator in the pseudonymous artist JIM JOE, who for the past decade has operated as a spectral figure, even by the graffiti world's standards. The choice felt somewhat ironic. JOE's art avoids the florid expressionism of the Wild Style school of muralism. His public output—usually deadpan, Zen-like koans executed on the street in a skeletal, listing text—revives the gnomic caps-lock scrawl of Al Diaz and Jean-Michel Basquiat's SAMO but with better humor. JOE can be understood as a poet who co-opts graffiti's methods of disruption and visibility, as if Frank O'Hara had discovered the Montana Fat Cap and sprayed his *Lunch Poems* on the side of MOMA.

In other ways, though, the pairing was appropriate. The Picture Collection is one of the remaining visual repositories unoptimized by algorithmic efficiency. It retains a stubbornly human feel, both in its haptic nature—its loose tear sheets invite the visitor to rifle through them—but also existentially. Like graffiti, an image from this holding exists not because of the fetishes of the market but simply because it pleased someone to place it there. In both instances, value functions outside or even contra the art industry.

JOE worked out of the Fifth Avenue branch virtually every day from

January 2023 to September 2024, and with few exceptions the pieces in this exhibition were produced there. He brought in no materials save for a pencil (an industrious refusal to pay for art supplies is the classic graffiti artist's ethos); all else was found on-site. Most of the works' subject matter related directly to city life or to the library itself. Nineteen delicate drawings spliced collection images into some new amalgam. These collisions shaded toward visual gags or linguistic punch lines, as in *Buddha Evades Fare*, 2024, an image of the titular figure levitating over a subway turnstile, suggesting turnstile hopping—a transgressive art form unto itself—as a type of enlightenment.

Other works evinced the graffitist's talent for wry social observation. Six text-based pieces were executed on white cotton sheets used for the display of wares by sidewalk vendors, the likes of whom can be seen most days outside the library hawking knock-off Gucci handbags on the pavement. Stretched like canvas, the sheets with their dappled sneaker marks aped the cool-white Vermont marble veining in which the Beaux Arts building is caked, linking ideas about authenticity, imitation, and perception.

The show's central works, *EVERY BOOK I REQUESTED IN ROOM 300 AT THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE YEAR 2023*, and *EVERY BOOK I REQUESTED IN ROOM 300 AT THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE YEAR 2024*, comprised two large frames containing 124 and 86 carbon-copy call slips, respectively, on which JOE reproduced each title's cover imagery, some in exacting detail, others less so. The selections were largely monographs and books about other artists, including Joseph Beuys, Vija Celmins, Ray Johnson, On Kawara, and Sturtevant: people whose work shares an affinity with JOE's project. This thematic rhyming—along with the tensions between homage and echo, invention and reproduction—were an affecting metaphor that articulated artmaking's inherent bootlegging. The original top slips were on view in the library's Rose Reading Room, tucked in the back for anyone who knew where to look.

The residual products of this endeavor can be considered a record of the real work: a durational, public performance of acquiring knowledge and making art, devotional in its intensity. Like Kawara, who sent hundreds of telegrams to friends simply to inform them he was still alive, JOE produced both a record of time and proof of life.

—Max Lakin

JIM JOE, *EVERY BOOK I REQUESTED IN ROOM 300 AT THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE YEAR 2023*, pencil on found paper, 41½ × 101½".

