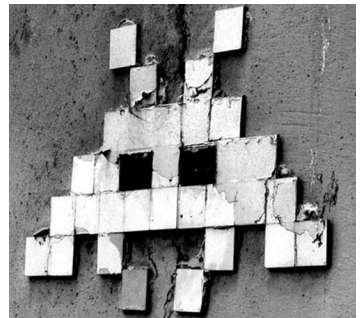


# L.A.: Invasion Over?

## Raiford Guins

There was a time, not too long ago, when the urban landscape of Los Angeles was awash with little pixilated mosaics of 8-byte video game characters like the alien fleet from Space Invaders, the ghosts of Pac Man fame, Berzerk robots, and Galaxian's cosmic insectoids. Hollywood, the West side, Santa Monica, and Venice were invaded by these friendly visitors in the form of site-specific pieces by aptly named Parisian artist, "Invader." Invader has graciously bestowed thirty-four worldwide cities with his low-res "gifts," as he prefers to view his work, and has captured the attention of art magazines as well as galleries. From June 11–July 9, 2005 he had a solo show at Sixspace in Los Angeles entitled, "Rubik Cubism," that featured his well-known tile mosaics and introduced the city to the medium of the hand-held puzzle, Rubik's Cube, for creating art. Like Jean-Michel Basquiat whose NYC graffiti pieces were pilfered by opportunists in the 1980s, Invader's ninety-three mosaics have all but vanished from the urban surfaces of L.A. I first began taking pictures of *L'Invasion De Los Angeles* in 2003 and originally intended this essay to address urban redesign in the post-graffiti moment. Yet, the redesign that exists is one that has pick-pocketed Invader's gifts: A city that seems not to appreciate his ever-observant pixels watching over our everyday habitation of its freeways, beaches, parks, sidewalks, streets, and stores. For it seems that the "spirit of the gift," to conjure Marcel Mauss, is returned not with respect or generosity but with theft and selfishness. The City of Angels has a devil ransacking public art (store owners? city officials? collectors?) for the benefit of private gain. Fame has its price while bankrupting the sociality of public space. For me, Invader's tiny tiles plaster over the nondescript, ugly, and routine. They produce an opportunity for conversation as I stop to photograph one and a stranger asks the inevitable: "What are you taking a picture of?" On this site we speak. Strangers reminisce about having played video games.

We share a collective memory returned in ephemeral form. We talk about fun times and smile knowingly. Together we marvel at the wonderful colors lovingly glued together to resemble raster graphic aliens. The mosaics are not vulgar, far from the boisterous tag that does no more than announce "I was here" to learned eyes in an obscure signature. These invaders are shy, perhaps even reclusive. Preferring the periphery—playing beneath the icon that is Randy's Donut, resting just above an entrance, waiting on a curb, sharing rather than destroying space on the exterior of a public restroom with other mosaics, and avoiding traffic on Interstate 10 West—they play with the corners of our eyes instead of assault us head on. In a city of bloated billboards, automotive shells, congested noise, pollution, and crumbling infrastructures these gifts demonstrate sensitivity, serenity, and peace. Or, at least did, as all I can share in this essay are the last invaders and the traces of others. Far from a hostile invasion, Invader's mosaics adorn the city with friendly faces whose pixilated smile is being scraped off. Where a curb was once something more, or a wall a surprise, we revert to cement, brick, and the remains of something else that could've been.



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