

Hank O'Neal

XCIA's STREET ART PROJECT: THE FIRST FOUR DECADES



Before becoming a photographer, **Hank O'Neal** was an agent with the Domestic Operations Division of the Central Intelligence Agency. In the mid 1970s, encouraged by his friend and mentor the legendary American photographer Berenice Abbott, and inspired by Walker Evans' Depression-era photos of peeling posters and hand-painted signs, O'Neal left the CIA and devoted himself to documenting the burgeoning street art scene in New York City. Over the next 40 years, he would take thousands of photographs, compiling a legacy of one of the most vital and significant movements in the world of art. **XCIA's STREET ART PROJECT: The First Four Decades** (Siman Media Works, 2012) is a meticulously documented, sumptuous celebration of some of the most beautiful, meaningful expressions of street art yet to be collected—early work of SAMO (Jean-Michel Basquiat's original street name); Keith Haring's "Radiant Baby" in the New York City subway; a Banksy mural in a Los Angeles parking lot; Richard Hambleton's "Shadowmen" of the 1980s; JR's "Faces with Eye Masks" in 2011; the "Silence=Death" pink triangle posters; and Shepard Fairey's now-iconic "Hope" portrait of Barack Obama, among many others.

"The street art I photograph," says Hank O'Neal, "must be in a public place, must be visually captivating and perhaps beautiful, must be the product of an informed intellect (not of a vandal), and must be purposeful. It can be a jolt by a single artist or a chaotic improvisation by dozens of different hands in unexpected places, in unexpected ways." Part of O'Neal's talent lies in his ability to find and recognize art in often surprising places, whether it's in a cemetery in Paris or a doorway on Madeira Island, a lifeguard station in Venice, California, or on a piece of the Berlin Wall.

Perhaps most important, in many cases, O'Neal's photograph is the only visual record of a masterful work of street art, an art form that is ephemeral by its very nature. The photographs in **XCIA's STREET ART PROJECT** capture hundreds of never-before-published photos showcasing the work of the most established street artists of several generations, including: Richard Hambleton, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Shepard Fairey, Banksy, Mr. Brainwash, Toofly, JR, Armyof1/jc2, and of course, "Artist Unknown."

With its exquisite design, XCIA's **STREET ART PROJECT** is an object of art in its own right. The photographs, each possessing the narrative power of a great story, capture the melancholy of the passage of time, the thrill of the chase, and the lure of the forbidden.

Hank O'Neal (aka XCIA) was a case officer with the Domestic Operations Division of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1963 to 1976. His previous books include *The Eddie Condon Scrapbook of Jazz*; *A Vision Shared: A Classic Portrait of America and Its People, 1935–1943*; *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer*; and *The Ghosts of Harlem: Sessions with Jazz Legends*. He lives in New York City where he continues his work in the music world, as well as his work as a photographer, capturing images for the ongoing Street Art Project.