



Jaime Plensa: Landscapes of the soul

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Jaime Plensa is a sculptor whose work mirrors the human condition. His commissions for public spaces worldwide show us his concept of sculpture as a laboratory of ideas built upon the principle of energy moving the universe.

The material and the word are the two vectors converging in this space of volumetric reification that is sculpture and which Plensa has extended to the domains of the stage and poetry.

At the beginning of his career, in the early nineteen eighties, his sculpture was anthropomorphic, with expressionist volumes in wrought or cast iron, transporting us to human landscapes of totemic and primitive echoes. These were years when, after the avalanche of conceptualism, art was immersed in the visceral neo-expressionism which flooded Europe with new figurative trends.

But Jaime Plensa's sculpture would quickly acquire cleaner forms. Architectures, walls, spheres, geometric shapes and new materials began to appear, stripping down organic and material corpus to bring new dimensions: the literary and the scientific. Then there came the architecture, wall, or the *Bedrooms* or *Waiting-*

rooms, translucent dwellings confirming Plensa's sculptures as corporeal receptacles. They are sculptural habitats marking the presence of the absent human body, or a being's loneliness, a condition that is increasingly present in his work. A poem by Jaime Plensa indicates this change: "Every human being is a 'place'. Each woman, man, child, old person is a living space itself that moves and grows; a 'place' in time, in geography, in size and colour".

These boxes of individual architecture, cells where thought and solitude can live, act as a turning point in his career, as a step towards using matter as a sounding board able to transmit an idea, a thought. As Carsten Ahrens reminds us, in Plensa "sculpture is the presence of ideas in real space [...] the material relevance of thought".

Plensa has a need to create bodies, questioning human existence. He often draws parallels between the human body and a geographical space and this is where the letter, the word gives conceptual corpus to these seated characters, shaping with the body and the word, a "place". Resonant volumes, organic boxes where words create thought.

The word is an inexhaustible source for Jaume Plensa. Borrowed from biblical texts, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the works of Shakespeare or William Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*, it also shines light and concept on his public projects.

His sculpture has increasingly dematerialised, reaching a point where more intangible aspects are valued. After using iron, bronze, aluminium, plastic, alabaster, fibre-glass or glass, he has reached a more intangible level, with the use of light and sound, increasingly present in public art works. Light as a sculptural element is inherent in his *Blake in Gateshead* (Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 1996) and *Bridge of Light* (Jerusalem, 1998). The immateriality of sound is present in the alabaster cells of *Love Sounds* (1998) or the exhibition of gongs by Kestner Gesellschaft (1999) in Hanover. The incorporation of optical and acoustic effects by using Internet has opened his work up to human communication, a topic resumed in *The Crown Fountain in Chicago* (2004).

One of his latest public works stresses the dematerialisation of his sculpture *Breathing* (2005), BBC Broadcasting House in London, an inverted fibre-glass cone projecting a kilometre-long beam of light into the night sky, paying tribute to journalists killed in action.

The arrival of globalization, with geographical awareness of a simultaneously multiple and diverse world, has recently led Plensa to develop the issue of claiming human rights globally, denouncing oppression, inequality and injustice. These works, which belong to the series *In the Darkness*, denounce the vulnerability of human beings, the degradation of the human condition today. These are the images you can find in the fourth issue of the journal *Transfer*, the very copy you are holding in your hands. Plensa expresses himself through images of various figures, men and women of the world, taken from different ethnic groups, or simply naked figures on which he prints articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The nakedness of the figures shows the deprivation

of those stripped of their rights. A Sioux Indian in front of the word *Soul*, while "woman" is associated with our society's disorders: depression, anorexia, bulimia, hysteria, amnesia, insomnia; a society of desire and disease that has become global and plural, in which the human condition is affronted and insulted by an oppressive society, exploitative of minorities. These are human landscapes; landscapes of the soul the artist wishes to convey to society in order to reach a pool of collective awareness. This is human geography, drawn by Plensa on the background of a photographic record, a stage that is manipulated and broken up to become more ghostly, clearly demonstrating the awareness of otherness: there is another human condition on the other side of the mirror.

If the word has been one of the most effective instruments in expanding the scope of Jaume Plensa's sculpture, the stage-set has been another area where he has made more direct contact with the public. In 1996 he began to collaborate with the theatre group Fura dels Baus with the opera *Atlàntida* by Manuel de Falla, which has been consolidated over eleven years with important works like: *The Martyrdom of Saint Sébastien* (1997) by Claude Debussy; *The Damnation of Faust* (1999) by Hector Berlioz; *The Magic Flute* (2003) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; *Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók and *Diary of One Who Disappeared* by Leos Janáček in 2007. The stage is a platform which embraces all the elements of the work of art as a whole (architecture, materials, light, sound and human energy) in a perfect marriage between the material and the intangible ||