

Paul Ramírez Jonas

ATLAS, PLURAL, MONUMENTAL

On view April 29–August 6, 2017

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

- *Atlas, Plural, Monumental* features a wide variety of multimedia artwork by the artist Paul Ramírez Jonas including large-scale sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, and his signature participatory works made during the last quarter of a century.
- Paul Ramírez Jonas was born in 1965 in California. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.
- Ramírez Jonas is interested in the connection between personal experiences and collective knowledge, and the importance of storytelling in understanding our lives.
- Many of Ramírez Jonas's earliest works focused on how objects can make history real in the present. Inspired by explorers, inventors, and scientists, the artist creatively reenacted their experiments and discoveries as a way of sharing their experiences from the past. One example is the series of kites Ramírez Jonas reproduced inspired by drawings from inventors hoping to create the first flying machines. The artist also connected disposable cameras to the kites to document their flight. In the exhibition visitors can see the kites displayed next to the images from the view of the kite.
- Ramírez Jonas calls the pre-existing texts, cultural artifacts, and historical models that he references in his work “scores” and uses them as outlines or arrangements that are set into motion by his personal actions. Often he alters the objects he crafts so that they document the experiment’s success as well as his artistic performance in the present.
- Ramírez Jonas has also designed objects and performances that engage the audience directly in creating the artwork’s meaning. Some of these participatory works call on the audience to reflect on the power of their voice by communicating ideas audibly and verbally with a “speech act,” or publish their words with a written message. An examples of this is *The Commons* (2011) a riderless equestrian monument made of cork. Visitors are invited to interact with the piece by pinning messages onto the base.
- Ramírez Jonas’s most recent performative works are often site-specific and take place in publicly shared locations or give participants access to a “closed” space, such as a city park or museum exhibit after hours, in exchange for making a promise or signing a contract. They generate opportunities for accountability, sharing and trust between the artist and participants.
- Ramírez Jonas’s work redefines what many people have come to expect from public art by creating new ways for the audience to reflect and interact with monuments and public spaces and with each other. His work seeks to make these social relationships tangible through objects and demonstrate how “the public” can be formed through particular actions and shared experiences.

KEY QUESTIONS

1. How does the past play a role in your understanding of the present? How does it impact your everyday experiences?
2. How do individual experiences connect us to our communities? What are some of the shared narratives that are a part of our cultural knowledge?
3. What are some of the ways that actions are embedded in objects? How do objects tell stories or provide evidence of history?
4. What is the significance of speaking or reading a text out loud? How is speaking in public different from speaking in private? Does this apply to the written word?
5. What are some examples of promises that you have made or have been made to you? What makes an oath different from other types of statements? Can you think of any promises that are unspoken?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

HISTORY & SCIENCE

- How does the history of science deal with experiments that are not necessarily well-known or celebrated achievements? How does this impact the way that we think about progress?
- Have you ever tried to recreate an experiment or invention? What did you discover (or rediscover)?

SOCIAL STUDIES

- What is the purpose of a monument? Who decides which historical events or individuals are worthy of the history books? How do those decisions impact the way we think about history?
- What is a public space? Who has access to it, and under what circumstances?

VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS

- What are some of the ways that Ramírez Jonas reinterprets pre-existing texts as “scores,” and how are they transformed into other visual formats?
- How does the artist’s documentation of his performances allow us to witness or experience them for ourselves? How is this different from artworks with which the audience can physically interact?
- What is the role of the artist in works requiring participation by the public? How does Ramírez Jonas utilize the relationship between audience and artist in his work?