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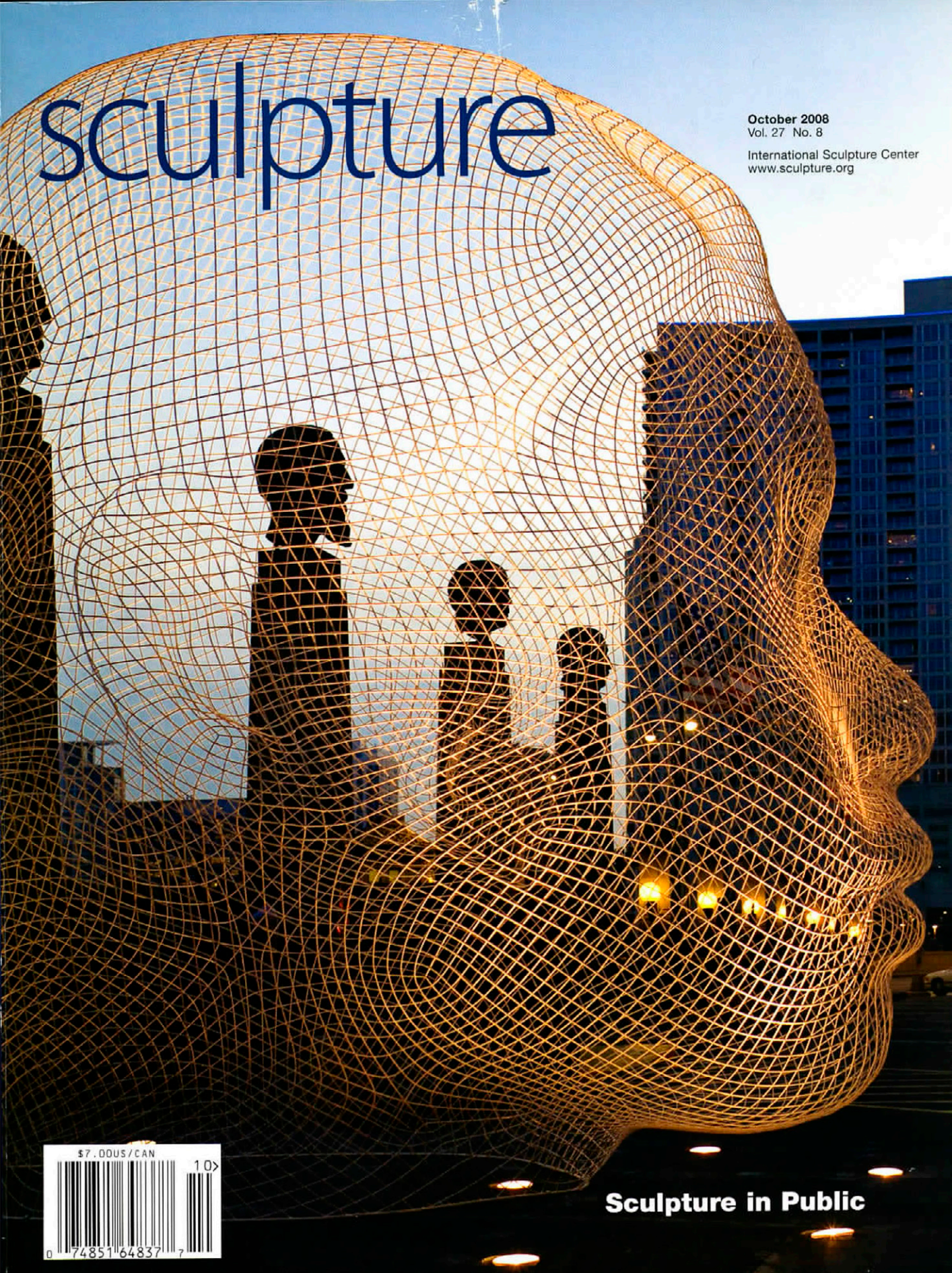

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Jaume Plensa

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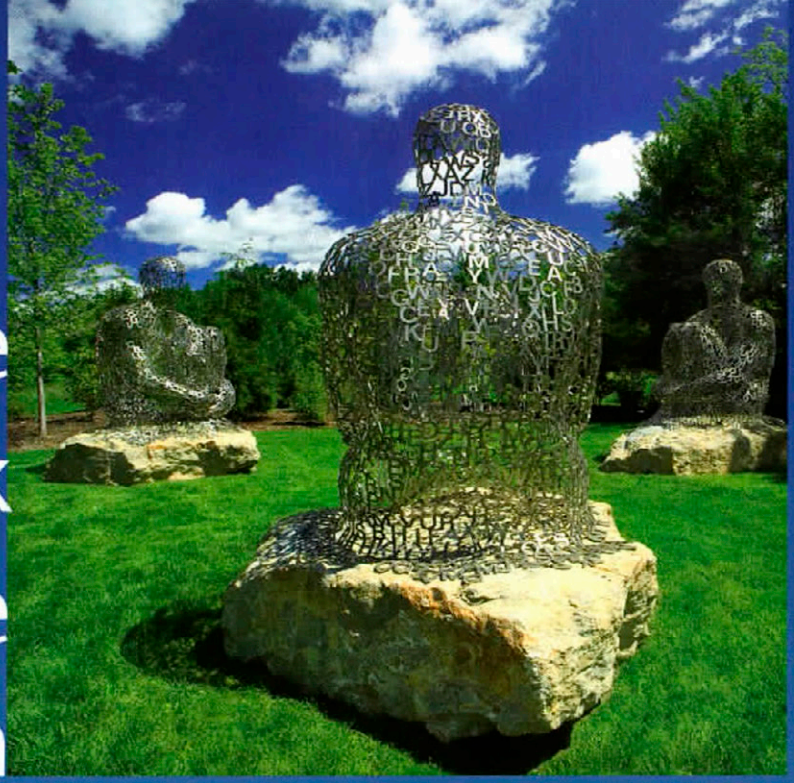
Nomade, 2007. Painted stainless steel. Approx 8 meters/26 feet tall. Photo by Alex Cooney.

The Shock of the Known



JAUME PLENSA

BY KEITH PATRICK

Nomade, 2007. Painted stainless steel, 800 x 550 x 530 cm. View of work installed in Miami Beach, Florida. Inset: *I, you, she, or he...*, 2006. Stainless steel and stone, 120 in. high. View of work installed at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Crown Fountain, 2000–04. Glass, stainless steel, LED screens, light, wood, granite, and water, 2 16-meter-high towers, total area 2,200 square meters.

When Descartes deduced *cogito ergo sum* or when Einstein concluded that $E=MC^2$, they formulated ideas of such incisive simplicity that we intuitively accept them as right. No matter that few of us are qualified to follow their precise reasoning, it is enough that such complex deductions have been so succinctly distilled and have thus entered our everyday vocabulary.

It is a lesson worth keeping in mind when approaching the work of Barcelona-based artist Jaume Plensa. Before entering into any discussion of the work itself, we have to consider that the physical manifestation—what I will inadequately call "the sculpture"—is subservient to the *idea*, and that the idea is invariably a synthesis of elements drawn from Plensa's complex and pluralistic perspective on the world. It is an idea honed to such a degree of essence that, like those of Descartes and Einstein, it carries the deceptive simplicity that we might be tempted to call "the truth."

The complexities of that philosophical outlook are beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say that Plensa's thinking has a global reach. It is informed by the art, literature, philosophy, religions, and customs of many different cultures and epochs, and in particular by their impact on the ways in which individuals and societies function. It is an extremely subjective reading of the histories of mankind, but nevertheless one that holds a kind of universal and almost archetypal relevance.

The physical aspect of the work, then, is arrived at through the pursuit of ideas that have little in common with the more formal aspects of contemporary sculpture and yet are fundamental to the world at large. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the concept of "signature style" is not easily applied to Plensa's work. Yet once we grasp the centrality of the idea to his practice, the formal diversity of his production assumes a coherence and logic that, by comparison, reduces the formulaic signature piece to mere empty rhetoric. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Plensa's public works, where considerations of both location and social interaction inevitably determine an open and disclosive approach.

In parallel with his studio production, Plensa has been making public works—some 30 or more commissions to date—since the beginning of the '90s. At the time of the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, he was commissioned to install work on the streets of his native city. He elected to work in El Born, a neighborhood layered with historical associations. Although cast in iron and therefore closely related to his studio works of the period, the forms of these works address local associations while attempting an intervention in the modern city and the lives of its inhabitants, thus acknowledging that the most important element in the equation of public art is people. Already there is a sense of a staged setting for an audience, an invitation to engage with the work and its context that imbues not only the inert material, but also the immediate environs with an animating discourse.

In much of Plensa's cast iron work of the '90s—as with the resin and glass cabinets or "cells" that followed later in the same decade, the hanging steel curtains, or more recent figurative works—we find words or simply letters. The distinction is important, for although words are the carriers of ideas, letters are a priori objects, things in themselves existing in the world of phenomena. If there is anything approaching a formal leitmotif in Plensa's work, it is this almost Cartesian dualism of object and meaning, signifier and signified—or, in terms of the artist's own metaphysics, the "spirit" that is at one and the same time distinct from, yet animates, the inert "body" of the physical piece from within.

Plensa grew up in an environment of books rather than art, and his concretization of letters as physical phenomena at times comes close to Sartre's seminal description of his own

LAURA MEDINA

childhood fascination with the mysterious yet omnipresent world of the printed word: "opaque...small, dark veins...Sentences emerged that frightened me: they were like real centipedes; they swarmed with syllables and letters."

Recent examples include Plensa's *Nomade* (exhibited at the Musée Picasso, Antibe, 2007) and *El alma del Ebro* (*The Soul of the Ebro*) for the 2008 Expo in Zaragoza, Spain. Here, the outer shell is composed solely of words welded together in a simulacrum of the human form, forcing a reading that alternates between the corporeal image of the body, the physical existence of individual letters, and the ideas carried by the words themselves. If words can exist as brute form, simply as phenomena, we are invited to reflect on the nature of the transition by which words assume the transparency of meaning, the ephemera of ideas.

From these first examples, we can see that while Plensa's formal vocabulary has apparently undergone a transition from the abstract to the figurative, this shift is ultimately of little significance. Except, that is, insofar as the figurative elements of recent years make more explicit his longstanding commitment to a philosophy that sees art as a catalyst for social interaction and understanding.

What *has* changed is the scale, and that change is largely predicated on the demands of the public commission. By scale, I don't only mean the physical size of the works, but the scope of the underpinning ideas, not to mention the demands on time and resources, the travel, the budget, the teams of engineers and architects, the committee meetings and presentations, and so on. The pivotal element here is Plensa's refusal to impose the stereotypical signature piece on public space. While we can often trace a formal lineage directly or indirectly to earlier work, and therefore arrive at some form of taxonomy, his premise is

Right: *Bridge of Light*, 2002. Wood, stainless steel, glass, and light, 57 x 515 x 515 cm. Below: *Conversation à Nice*, 2007. Polyester resin, stainless steel, and light, 7 elements, 12 meters high each.

TOP: COURTESY THE JERUSALEM FOUNDATION / BOTTOM: CANCA/ERIC BOUZET

rethought in relation to each new challenge, each physical location, each new community. And, where appropriate, each new culture.

Thus, in Japan, Plensa's "words" have at times carried references to traditional Japanese folk myths, as with the eight color-illuminated monoliths that constitute his *Seven Deities of Good Fortune* (2000), or the work addresses familiar cultural artifacts (*The House of Birds*, 1999). Conversely, the majority of Plensa's public works in that country are fabricated in glass, a material conspicuously absent from the Japanese tradition.

Plensa is currently working on *Wishing Well* (scheduled to open in Calgary in 2010), a piece in which a green granite plinth takes the geographical form of the province of Alberta punctuated by light beams that mark the principal towns. In the center is the eponymous well, a reference not only to rural communities of the recent past, but also to wishing wells and fountains. It is an activity in which the community is invited to participate without any explanation needed.

Writing about Plensa, William Jeffert says that the "works are intuitively understood." This is perhaps not quite the case, but what we do intuit is that both form and concept derive from a vocabulary that is already familiar and in which we can readily partake. It's not that the artist is stating the obvious—far from it—but his conceptual framework speaks through forms that are common to the world around us and not through more hermetic points of reference exclusive to the art world. If the Modernist tradition was predicated on the shock of the new, Plensa exploits the "shock" of the known, though subtly understated and invariably multi-layered, in which a synthesis of form and concept is pared down so that it seems an affirmation of something we feel we have known all along.

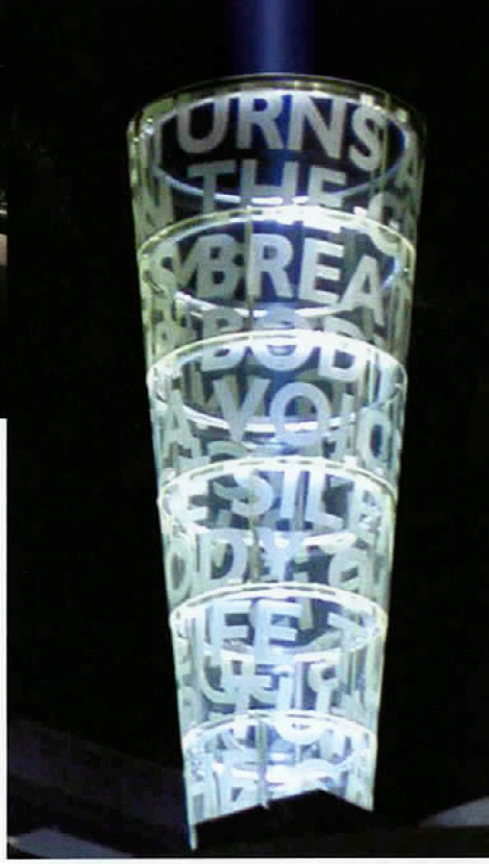
Consider Plensa's most ambitious public project to date: *Crown Fountain* (2004) in Chicago's Millennium Park. Almost every component is designed around a rectangular grid, from the granite slabs of the shallow water pool to the twin LED towers and the glass bricks from which they are constructed. It is perhaps this austere Modernist trope—an homage to the city's architectural heritage—that by contrast makes the slow-moving images on the giant screens seem almost alive. And yet we have all seen giant images of the human face before. No single element taken in isolation is unique. In fact, it is their very familiarity that lends the space a sense of homecoming. But taken as a whole, an unexpected alchemy unfolds. Largely unconscious associations begin to materialize: associations with other places, with the archetypal myth of walking on water, with the oversized icons of the ancient world, with waterfalls and cataracts, with the ebb and flow of the sea, with the realization that water truly is the essence of life. None of this is overtly stated, but the scale and juxtaposition of the physical elements and images encourage us to let our imaginations wander in these directions.

***Self-Portrait with Tree*, 2007. Bronze, earth, and tree, 75 x 50 x 75 cm.**

Even if this is not everyone's experience, there can be no denying the freedom that *Crown Fountain* affords people to simply relax and enjoy. Nor can there be any question of the site's ability to generate social interaction, fulfilling the primary criterion for any such civic project: to create a space for people amidst the anonymity of the modern city.

The fundamental familiarity of Plensa's formal language is at once countered by its diversity and ingenuity—and its essential "rightness" for the project in hand. Just as Duchamp's urinal and bottle rack could at one and the same time be perfectly familiar objects yet carry the most radical ideas of any 20th-century artwork, so Plensa's diverse forms are disarming precisely because their familiarity has been transposed to another context or is serving another end. And with Plensa, form is always a means to an end and never an end in itself.

MURIEL ANSSENS, © ADAGP, PARIS, 2007



Above and detail: *Breathing*, 2005. Glass, stainless steel, and light, 10 meters high. Work installed at BBC House, London.

One such "form" that Plensa has reinvented in various guises is the column of light. *Bridge of Light* (1998–2002), the upward-reaching beam realized in Jerusalem, is part of a set of works that includes *Blake in Gateshead* (Baltic, England, 1996) and an even earlier commission made for Auch, France, in 1991. Each one is individually contextualized. At the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, for example, the work is set into a steel base carrying the words of the English poet, artist, and mystic William Blake. Yet all embody the apparent ambition of reaching for the heavens, of light restoring the earth's molten core to its origins in the distant depths of the universe. And in common with all of Plensa's public work, they are beacons for people, visual magnets that draw crowds and define a meeting point.

It is an idea pursued in yet another distinct series of public works, including *L'Âme de la Vallée* (Vallorbe, Switzerland, 2000), *Talking Continents* (Jacksonville, Florida, 2003), and *Conversation à Nice* (Nice, France, 2007), in which kneeling figures are set high on poles. The poles are in part expedient, allowing the internally illuminated figures to be seen from a distance. They are also isolating, setting the figures on a higher plane, from which we might begin to deduce associations with the likes of Saint Simeon Stylites, the ascetic who retreated to a pillar in the Syrian desert. It is not that the saint was necessarily Plensa's point of reference, rather that the accessibility of the forms opens the work to the possibility of many such readings. Therefore, while the social function of the work is overtly transparent, the reading is never closed.

Another of Plensa's public commissions debuted as part of the 5th Liverpool Biennial. Plensa has worked previously in the north of England, at the Henry Moore Sculpture Studio in Halifax, where he realized an ambitious installation (*Twins*, 1993) in response to the industrial history of the immediate area. In a similar vein, his proposal for Liverpool celebrates the area's historical links with coal. *Dream* stands above one of the many mines closed by the Thatcher administration, an episode that still carries bitter memories. Plensa attempts a cathartic intervention, a symbolic "lighthouse," again employing the light beam, although now enclosed within a 20-meter-high white concrete head. The female visage is compressed, suggesting not a literal but a metaphorical reading, associated perhaps with the ground below where the remaining coal lies equally compressed beneath the weight of earth. This "earth spirit" not only marks the site of the former mine, it acts as a beacon, once again drawing people to this abandoned location. For the people of Liverpool—one of the most economically depressed regions in the U.K.—*Dream* offers a metaphorical ray of hope, a potential meeting point to reunite a broken community.

Finally, let us return to the theme of letters/words and another of Plensa's recent commissions, this one for BBC Broadcasting House in the center of London. *Breathing* (2005) incorporates yet another light beam, but in other formal aspects, it is unique in Plensa's oeuvre. A giant glass cone reaches skyward from the roof of the new building, inscribed with words, although perspective contrives to ensure that they are at best legible as fractured syllables. But the intention is clear, not only echoing the BBC's motto of nation speaking to nation, but reaching beyond into the great void that is space.

I am tempted to say that, although this is a public commission, being at roof level, it is not exactly sited in a public space. But of course it is. If only symbolically, it is possibly the most public place in Britain. As such, it is appropriate that Plensa's fractured words concretize what is emanating unseen from the nearby radio masts and demonstrate how the jumbled words permeating the ether will inevitably fall on ears for which the English language is simply a broken series of sounds.

Over the past 20 years, Plensa's production has been so richly textured by worktypes and by an involvement with materials, it has bequeathed him an enormous visual vocabulary that he's staked out as his own. To name but a few, his work has embraced metals, glass, resin, stone, water, paper, moving images, appropriated photographs, sound, light, neon, found objects, cast objects, heavy objects, light objects, objects that hang, protrude, or weigh down on the floor, letters/words, curtains that flow with quotations, names, diseases, anatomy, poetry, philosophy, and alchemy. It is as if Plensa has created a whole lexicon of formal possibilities that he continues to draw on, embellish, and add to—but always in the service of the idea.

Keith Patrick is the author of Jaume Plensa: The Crown Fountain.

BBC/ANNA GORDON. COURTESY RICHARD GRAY GALLERY