

In Jaume Plensa's workshop **SPEECH AND MATTER**

José Jiménez.-

It is some time ago now, maybe eight or nine years, since I first visited Jaume Plensa's workshop in Sant Feliu de Llobregat, a city in the industrial belt surrounding Barcelona, very close to Sant Just Desvern, where the artist has his residence. In 2010, I come back to the workshop, which is just one of many very tall, rectangular buildings on the Multindus Industrial Estate. Right beside the entrance is a small premises built at the height of what would be a first floor, which is used as an office. Jaume smiles and jokes, "The workshop is the head". When we go inside, he apologises that there are not so many pieces, as his most recent productions are still in Dallas, where the Nasher Sculpture Center presented a huge exhibition until 2 May, titled *Jaume Plensa: Genus and Species*.



When I ask him about how that project arose, he explains the personal interest showed by Raymond Nasher, a real estate developer and banker. Following a trip to Mexico with his wife Patsy in 1950, he started to collect pre-Columbian art. In 1967, Mrs.

Nasher bought a bronze sculpture by Jean Arp as a birthday present for her husband and ever since then they continued to buy contemporary pieces, going on to amass one of the most important collections of modern and contemporary sculpture in the world. After his wife's death in 1988, the banker further extended the collection, which would later be exhibited to the general public in Dallas (2003), in a venue designed by Renzo Piano and Peter Walker.

Three years after this museum was opened, Nasher bought two sculptures by Plensa: *Song of Songs III & IV* (2004), two glass 'kiosks', light and stainless steel, the title of which alludes to Solomon's *Song of Songs*. It was then that he started to approach the Catalan artist to enquire about the possibility of organising an exhibition at his centre. Unfortunately, the collector died on his return from a trip to Europe in 2007 and did not live to see the project through. However, his three daughters decided to go ahead with the idea. They contacted Jeremy Stick, Director of the Museum, and fulfilled their father's dream.

This effort culminated with first exhibition of a living sculptor at the American centre. The display consists of a selection of pieces completed between 2004 and 2009, in a synthesis of Plensa's latter years of work, including his recent works: eleven stylised alabaster 'heads' of young girls, elongated upwards from the block of stone. *Twins I & II* (2009) also travelled to Dallas: two huge figures in a sitting position with their knees drawn up to their chests. The bodies, which are almost four metres high, consist of letters from various alphabets, made of stainless steel painted white.

Some of the girls' 'heads' remain in the workshop. They are very impressive, extremely beautiful sculptures, in which the author maintains the full block of stone with its imperfections. The elongated faces and closed eyes make the faces appear broken and fragmented, lending the work an air of incompleteness or even decadence. Therein lies their beauty, *perfection in imperfection*, the spirit springing from the very heart of the matter, just like in human beings themselves. I am drawn to one of the figures, which is made of marble rather than alabaster; Jaume explains that in this case the hues of the stone are darker and they don't have "the transparencies of alabaster". In any case, it is also a beautiful sculpture; one that shows the subtle way in which the artist creates a record of a specific person, their psyche, flow from the stone, while at the same time establishing a link with the rest of mankind. This is precisely what is conveyed in the title of the Dallas exhibition: *genus and species*. Instead of the psyche, or inner life, Plensa prefers to talk about the "soul", something that has preoccupied him in recent years as a motif to which to lend form and expression.

His flair for large formats and the need for space led him to rent the building adjacent to the one that I had already visited. Creating sculptures is no simple task. Significant

expenditure is required during the production process, which is also quite complex. Nowadays, the artist has five assistants at his workshop, not to mention the parts of the process that he has to outsource. Organising exhibitions is also more expensive in the case of pieces of large dimensions: the cost of transport, insurance and assembly is much higher than in the case of other formats.

In the adjoining building, I see two of these figures made of letters from different alphabets starting to take shape: Jaume is aware of the extraordinary cultural and spiritual wealth of the multiple alphabets that human beings use to channel the various languages. However, the figure is a structure or a chest, an inscribed body, as we can see from Freud and psychoanalysis, which supports the diversity of emotions, affections and passions.

Between his earliest works made of wrought iron - which endeavour to give form to human passions with the materials of the earth, much as an ironsmith-chemist might do - and his output in recent years, Plensa has spanned an extraordinary creative journey and forged a language that is entirely his own. He is a different artist, unlike anyone else. This is an important detail to highlight at a time when styles and themes are repeated the world over. Of course, what is decisive is that this originality stems from the intense aesthetic quality of his work, exploring four channels that despite being different have the same intent: sculpture, public art, drawing and the opera. As well as iron, he has used glass, light, sound, steel and alabaster; a real amalgamation of materials and a diversity of fields that always have the same hallmark, a unique *brand*. Plensa has always insisted on the importance of the idea, "the matter", he tells me now, "regardless of the medium or technique that is chosen, which of course should be consistent with its expression, with how the idea materialises in artistic form".

Obviously, this *idea* is different in each case. However, if there is one thing that holds it up in time, it is for me the extraordinary link between the work and speech, and in particular, with poetic speech. From the *Libre de vidre*, in 1982, which included a poem by Antoni Tàpies and a prologue by Joan Brossa, or the extraordinary *Prière (Prayer)*, 1989, inspired by *The Litanies of Satan* by Baudelaire, to his most recent works, Plensa creates an area of spiritual energy that moves in a circular motion from speech to matter, to return once again transformed. It is a constant that is repeated in his sculptures, public projects, drawings or interventions for the opera. Although in recent times there is a greater presence of human bodies, figures or self-portraits, they all carry the sign of speech, implicitly or explicitly. Shakespeare, Goethe (*Dr. Faust* in particular), William Blake or the Valencia-born poet Vicent Andrés Estellés (1924-1993) are continuous references in all his lines of work. The latter poet is present in the two sentry-like figures perched atop pillars that were exhibited in Dallas. The title of this work is *La llarga nit (The Long Night)*, taken from a poem by the Valencian poet in which, with overtones that are reminiscent of Friedrich

Hölderlin, the poet becomes “*la palabra viva, / la palabra viva y amarga*” (the living speech, the living, bitter speech) of the people, only he remains awake, watching, while all the world sleep.

One of the works that represented a point of inflection in Jaume Plensa’s oeuvre is *The Crown Fountain*, a public art project that the family by the same name donated to the city of Chicago. After an intense, complex production process lasting four years, between 2000 and 2004, the intervention by the Catalanian artist managed to bring life to a public square that the city’s population have since embraced. The artwork consists of twin towers that display at intervals a thousand faces of the city’s inhabitants, filmed during the production process. The towers are linked by a thin sheet of water that remains stable. The towers acts as fountains and the water pours out of the people’s mouths, thus establishing a direct link between the art of our time and ancient classical sculpture in which fountains were associated to rivers and mythological characters. In this case, Plensa’s reflection is clear; he wishes to show “the idea of the anonymous, the people that make up the city, transformed into divinities”. On the other hand, this project also involves a visual revival of the figure of the gargoyle, enhanced by the possibilities afforded by technology today. The author explains that it is about “giving life through the mouth, an idea that is closely linked to speech”, and at the same time, fulfilling “another age-old dream: to walk on water”. Looking at the children running and playing over the sheet of water between the towers, or standing beside them waiting to be drenched by the water, it is plain to see the extent to which the citizens of Chicago have adopted the work as their own. It is one of the most successful examples of the strength and democratic expansion of art in our time.

Another of Jaume Plensa’s recent public projects is the commission for the Liverpool Biennial: *Dream*, completed in 2009 in St. Helens, a former mining town close to the city, depicting the stylised head of a nine-year old girl with her eyes closed. The title is inscribed on the platform of the work. It is a white sculpture standing 20 metres high, consisting of blocks of a conglomeration of marble and pigments that blends extraordinarily well in the green landscape of the area and can be seen from afar on the nearby motorway. In this case, too, the former miners and present-day inhabitants have made it their own: it is a monument that proudly commemorates the town’s working past, but which is open to the future in the form of the head of a dreaming girl. *Dream* marked the departure point for the alabaster heads and Plensa comments that “the head is a container for what we might call the soul”. In doing so, he evokes one of the most recent motifs of interest in his work: the *soul*, which is expressly mentioned in the title of another of his most recent works, *The Soul of the Ebro* (2008), presented at the International Exposition in Zaragoza.

Of course, what the author calls *soul* should not be construed in a traditional religious sense, although it obviously alludes to the spiritual dimension that gives courage to human

beings and for which the various religions have provided different versions. At this point we find an expressive circle, the artistic manifestation of the *idea*, which unites the seated figures and heads, always with their eyes closed, drawn into themselves in a meditating position. At the same time, this turn inwards communicates with speech and inscribed writing, from the curtain with the fragments of poems that together generate a unique new poem, to the characters of the different alphabets: Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi and Latin, inscribed on the two empty bodies in *Twins*, which are open so that the public can enter them. I think the idea of *twins*, of the double or duality, which has been a recurrent theme in Plensa's work from the outset, is also linked to the resonance of the inner life that leads us to discover in the depths of ourselves the echo of something that is elsewhere, but which reflects us and in which we are reflected. Thus the human being, in the dream of speech, is revealed as being simultaneously unique and equal, unrepeatable and predictable, different and identical.

This diversity in the midst of unity is also a feature of the new project that the Catalan artist has designed for the Burj Dubai Tower, in the Persian Gulf emirate, a building standing 828 metres tall that has been declared the world's highest skyscraper. The work is titled *World Voices* and it consists of 196 cymbals representing the 196 nations existing in the world today. In fact, it is a different formulation, or *variation* in the musical sense, on an idea that has already been proposed by Plensa before. In his exhibition at the Palacio de Velázquez venue of the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid in the year 2000, he presented an installation: *Wisperm* (*whisper* in German), which included 21 Chinese cymbals onto which drops of waters running from a similar number of containers fell. When the drops fell they produced different sounds, as each one of the 21 *Proverbs of Hell* by William Blake (of a total of 73) engraved on the instruments had a specific weight. One of the main inspirations for the idea of *duality* in Plensa's oeuvre is precisely the way in which Blake conceives *the union of opposites* as an indispensable condition for any kind of progress or improvement, as we can see at the start of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-93), "Without contraries there is no progression". In Dubai, the 196 cymbals cast in bronze and brass alloy and plated with 18-carat gold are horizontally suspended from a height onto titanium rods anchored at the bottom of two pools or water-holding receptacles, symbolising reeds in a lake. Finished by hand, the instruments create a distinct timbre as they are struck by dripping water, which the artist compares to the sound of water falling on leaves.

Like on other occasions, *World Voices* seeks *synesthesia*, to make the vibrations of all the senses flow together in the unity of the work. The artistic form, the sound, the flowing water...appeal to the senses of sight, hearing or touch. It is through these senses that our capacity for intellection is invoked. Jaume Plensa explains, "I'm not a conceptual artist and I

never have been: I'm a very physical artist, I need to touch things, but ideas can be touched too". It is important to bear in mind, as philosophy teaches from the outset, that the path of knowledge inevitably starts with the senses. Without sensory experience, there are no concepts, and the richer and more intense that experience is; the richer and more intense will be our intellectual understanding of any event, including the great questions about the nature of things, life or death.

The water that flows in *World Voices* has its continuity in the drawings, where the presence of liquids spilling is a constant. In his most recent sketches, the faces are also left open; they *flow*, they *drip*. The oldest and most venerable of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Thales of Miletus, at the dawn of our tradition, believed that water was the source and the constitutive principle of all things. There is no need to insist on this. Not only would we die without water, we *are* water; water in the shape of a body. The quiet waters that surround Narcissus or Ophelia are inevitably associated to death. The water that produces life, on the other hand, is a figure of *fluidity*, associated to formlessness, mobility and transparency. Such would be the purpose of Hydraulics, as characterised by Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* (III, paragraph 43): "Leaping waterfalls foaming and tumbling over rocks, cataracts dispersed into floating spray, springs gushing up as high columns of water, and clear reflecting lakes". Water that flows by human hand is, like Eros, a principle of life. In a poem by Baudelaire titled *The Fountain (Le Jet d' eau)*, the bubbling fountain "that's never silent, night or day" sweetly sustains the ecstasy attained in love. In the complex experience of the contemporary, this function reappears in Duchamp's waterfall, the "power of life" that sets the world in motion.

Nowadays, Plensa is working on the completion of a new public project: *Ogijima's Soul*, on the Japanese island by the same name, which is expected to be inaugurated in the month of July. Conceived as a Centre for Exchange, it is an open room located at the entrance to the island, beside the jetty, with a steel and glass room shaped like a mollusc shell. It consists of words formed by letters from the eight alphabets used in *Twins*. The idea is that the sun's rays passing through the roof will form shadows of words on the floor. While on first sight they may seem random, the idea is that the words should be felt to be woven together into an organic unity. To quote the artist, "they symbolise the connection between the island of Ogijima and the rest of the world". This is, in fact, what makes speech and language possible: without their presence, without their mediation, human beings would be *islands* without communication, closed in upon themselves. Speech opens us up to others and to the world. This is the message conveyed by Jaume Plensa's words inscribed on the material used in the work of art.