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Secrets and Lies

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Artist Paul Ramírez Jonas talks about half-truths and bureaucracy, fake IDs and institutional space, and the incipient decay of language.

Paul Ramírez Jonas, *Alternative Facts*, 2017 (detail). installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist

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In the art of Paul Ramírez Jonas, participation isn't just a byproduct, it's a crucial ingredient. Consider "Half-Truths," his current show at the New Museum in New York, and the three new social "sculptures" he made for it. In *Alternative Facts*, sham notaries put ersatz stamps of bureaucratic approval on visitors' lies. *I Bet You a Dollar It Will Rain Tomorrow* is a modified casino table on which to play games against the house. And *Fake ID* is a desk at which we're invited to open up our wallets and have our identities recast. All rely on artifacts and devices appropriate to their contexts: seals, ledgers, stamps, tokens. Yet as the artist's wry descriptions make clear, the vital ingredient of each work is what the visitor brings to the table: "lies and spare change"; "bets"; "contents of [. . .] pockets or wallets and the willingness to imagine a new identity."

In each instance, as in much of Ramírez Jonas's socially engaged practice, the work proceeds from a familiar format or structure. The artist then tweaks things just enough to kick off an investigation into a particular behavior, also suggesting how it might become an agent of change. It is, Ramírez Jonas has written, a project that that looks "to present preexisting content and known forms so they can be experienced as malleable"—an impulse guided by Bertolt Brecht's observation that "the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation."

"Half-Truths" is the second installment of the New Museum's annual R&D Summers program, an initiative devoted to "community partnerships and public dialogue at the intersection of art and social justice" that takes the form of a residency, an exhibition, and related events. For Ramírez Jonas, a 51-year-old New York-based artist originally from Honduras, the show caps off a hectic year that has included the realization of *Public Trust*, an award-winning public art project mounted at different locations around Boston, and "Atlas, Plural, Monumental," a midcareer retrospective organized by Dean Daderko at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston. I spoke with Ramírez Jonas by phone from his studio in Brooklyn.



Paul Ramírez Jonas, *Fake-ID*, 2017 (detail). Installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist

Jeffrey Kastner: You have two big shows up simultaneously now—"Atlas, Plural, Monumental," your retrospective at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston (CAMH), and "Half Truths," the exhibition and residency you're doing at the New Museum in New York. Is there much crossover between the two?

Paul Ramírez Jonas: The New Museum show has a lot to do with the one in Houston. In thinking about making the exhibition there, it was clear that a lot of the work I'd been doing involved engaging viewers in the public sphere, not in the exhibition space. More than two years ago, when (CAMH curator) Dean Daderko and I started to talk about the show, he said, "I can make a show of the exhibition-based work you've done in my sleep. The tricky thing is that about a third of your work is *not* for the gallery—like *Key to the City* or *Public Trust*—and if we omit that, we're not going to be telling your story." And I was adamant that I

didn't want to show performance "relics."

JK: Right. Boiling these participatory gestures down into a set of artifacts—showing some photographs and a bunch of keys, for instance, to describe *Key to the City*—wouldn't communicate what the work was about.

PRJ: I'm very interested in these questions. What worked for Vito Acconci or Lucio Fontana in the 1960s shouldn't be what social practice or participatory work uses by default today. I think we should be a little more ambitious.

JK: I've encountered this issue in my writing on Land Art. Those works were meant to be about the exigencies of site—about being in a particular place and having a particular experience, and also about a refusal of the proscribed spaces of the institution. But those artists didn't completely turn their backs on the galleries and museums, and the question of what constituted a plausible stand-in for what they were doing out in the landscape—plan, photograph, "non-site," whatever—was a crucial one for them.

PRJ: I had a conversation with Vito Acconci where he was basically arguing that his generation "blinked." He said: "We had left the gallery. We were having these events. People were coming. And then the galleries wanted us back. And at that moment we could have just said 'No thanks.' But instead we started framing photographs." So a few years ago, I decided to focus on the specifics of different modes of operation. Don't put a painting in a park; don't put a political demonstration in a museum. If I make work for a park, it will be for a park. And if I make something for an exhibition space and it will be for an exhibition space. I'm not going to force these translations. But when Dean and I started talking about how to deal with this in the context of the retrospective, I said hmmm—maybe I *have to* force it! Or at least find a way to make sense of it. That was the context in which I started to work on *Public Trust*.

That project was the first time I wrote a full-on score, because it was going to be so demanding and convoluted. And I decided I wasn't going to be the main

performer; I was going to bring others into it, rehearse it, teach it, and think about improvisation. That gave the piece a kind of autonomy. *Public Trust* has now happened in three different locations—it's lost some of that site-specificity, also in the sense that it's not specific to *my* body anymore. That's also the case with the New Museum works. Another crucial thing about the New Museum show was that the table where the interaction of *Public Trust* occurred became really elaborate, and that got me thinking of the nature of "the table" as a place for events to happen. My assistant Nathan Carey said, "You know what would be great is a show of all your tables." So we started to think about the previous work in relation to that.

JK: It makes sense that you'd be interested in the table as a locus of these kinds of relational activities. Your work has often investigated the connections between spatial and architectural environments—as well as things like stages and daises—and certain kinds of discourse. And expanding the project so it's not just your body, your presence, enacts the notion of a *polis*, of a mode of social interchange that's different to simply a group of people facing a single person—the artist, you.

PRJ: I definitely wanted to make these works less personality-based. So, for instance, I only perform in one of them— *Alternative Facts*, the piece where we "notarize" lies—and only on Thursday nights. The rest of it is facilitated by the young people who are part of the Teen Apprentice Program (TAP), a paid summer internship at the museum. I was just going to do *Alternative Facts* three hours a week. That had to do also with the cost of gold-plating the coin—you give me a penny and I make it gold in front of you: it's another example of the transformation that's going on; the lie is certified, the worthless coin is made into something valuable. So everyone loved that table and I started thinking that maybe the TAP kids could do it.



Paul Ramírez Jonas, *Alternative Facts*, 2017 (detail). Installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist

JK: My experience of the show was that the "notary" table felt very public—people were gathered around and were behaving as though they were participating even when someone else was actually sitting in the chair, engaged individually in the work. The second table, *Fake ID*, felt quite different from a spectator's perspective. It had a more traditional bureaucratic feel, like sitting down at the DMV—quieter, more intimate. And, of course, people are opening up their purses and wallets and putting their IDs and credit cards on the table. I almost felt bad about eavesdropping on the woman who was doing it when I was there. There was something about the truth-value of those documents that made for a very different mood than what was going on at the notary table, where everyone was just enjoying lying or listening to others lie.

PRJ: That's part of what the work is trying to modulate—publicness and intimacy, an inside and an outside. With *Public Trust*, there were times when some of the promises would outwardly feel too sweet, too maudlin. But on the inside it would

be someone struggling with something, even if the language was coded. And you felt like, wow, this is really intensely personal, and it's happening in public.

JK: Interestingly, the lies in *Alternative Facts* can also have some of that tension, that struggle, in them. One lie I saw was something to the effect of "I'm completely healthy." And that got me thinking about the ways in which the lies we tell, and the way we tell them, can also be revealing. I guess you could say it was an "honest" lie.

PRJ: If you ask someone to tell you a lie, it's a way of giving them license to say something—using negative speech or inverted speech—that's difficult. Someone said: "I love my mother, that's my lie." And I was like, right—it's much easier to say "I'm going to lie to you and say I love my mother" than it is to come straight out and say "I hate my mother." The lies seem to be falling into various categories. Some are just a kind of boastful wish-fulfillment—I'm a billionaire, or whatever. And then there are more complicated ones, like "I'm straight," which might have been said just to be funny, but also could have been someone who wasn't straight and wasn't out about it.

JK: The final table in the show is a kind of gambling table.

PRJ: It was an experiment with a table that has no score whatsoever, just the elements of a game. I started looking at casino tables and found they had a lot of the things I was interested in—certain kinds of rules for interaction that everyone follows, strange tokens to which value is communally assigned. So I made a hybrid from a blackjack felt and a roulette felt, and I made up a very simple game to start with, giving full license to the 14 TAP kids to invent their own rules and ways of interacting with the public. Very quickly they've invented four games that they've taught each other, and they continue to invent and refine the interaction completely on their own. They are also very generous with the public, and often allow participants to change the rules to suit their needs. So in some sense the work is making itself now.

It's funny: there are all these things that make my personal life difficult that are

great for my work. You know, if I have a dinner party, I'll invite a bunch of people over and I'll totally overdo the meal and I'll be in the kitchen serving everyone and I'll so erase myself that at the end of the evening I'll realize that I didn't actually talk to anyone! But in the work that drive to both control and be self-effacing is productive.



Paul Ramírez Jonas, *Fake-ID*, 2017 (detail). Installation and performance. Courtesy of the artist

JK: These questions your work has increasingly been engaging with—not just truth versus lies, but also the way certain speech acts structure interaction, the relationship of people to one another in a body politic that shares basic concerns, promises made and kept or not kept, the constituents of bureaucratic identity—are bound up with issues of sociality and ethics, but they're intensely topical and political, too. I'm curious whether our current political climate has changed what you perceive as the stakes around these questions, and around your work.

PRJ: Interestingly, the prototype for the notary piece was done while Obama was still president, way before the election. At the time I was concerned that maybe it was inconsequential, this issue of lying, and that maybe the piece in general was too playful, or cynical. And when I was thinking about *Public Trust*, I was thinking about various kinds of speech, and that there are lies and there are truths, and that everything in between is a promise of a sort. So then I started thinking about how promises are charged, and with *Public Trust* being presented in the lead-up to the election, and politicians making a multitude of promises, I thought it would be useful for members of the public to be given an opportunity to make their own promises. By the time the piece went up, Trump was the candidate, and it had become even more charged. And then he got elected and it was like—OK, time to bring back the piece about lying! Even the requirement in *Alternative Facts* that your lie can't be longer than a tweet is from two years ago. Events caught up with the work.

Giorgio Agamben argues that language's capacity to hold a promissory statement is actually what makes society possible, and that our language is degrading and losing that capacity, and when it finally does, society will fall apart. We're seeing that right now.

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