

PAUL RAMIREZ JONAS: The Promise of More

Retracing the endeavors of past explorers and inventors, and examining iconic means of exchange in the public sphere, Ramírez Jonas makes art on the potentiality of citizenship.

By **art ltd.** - May 1, 2017



"The Commons," 2011, Paul Ramirez Jonas
Cork, pushpins, adhesive, steel, wood, and hardware, 153" x 128" x 64"

"I have always considered myself merely a reader of texts," says artist Paul Ramirez Jonas, and in surveying the past 25 years of his work, in the newly opened exhibition "Atlas, Plural, Monumental" at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), it is easy to see why. Using existing histories and stories as blueprints for action, Ramirez Jonas retraces the steps of scientists, explorers, and inventors, searching for new ways to understand not just our past, but also our present. Through a multitude of forms and strategies, from sculpture to photography to participatory performance, his work reveals the poignant power of storytelling. Emphasizing the collaborative and generative relationship between the artist and audience, the breadth of Ramirez Jonas's work gathered together in Houston reveals an artist deeply committed to creating a space for exchange.

Born in California, raised in Honduras, and currently living and working in New York, Ramirez Jonas creates work that embodies the very idea of the artist as an explorer and innovator. Creating scores from existing narratives—a diary, a photograph, or a record—he examines how the past can function as a catalyst for the present. The act of reading becomes generative in Ramirez Jonas's hands, instigating and inspiring new discoveries. His early work shares the excitement, sense of adventure, and optimism that can come from journeying in the footsteps of others, whether that is traversing a seemingly impossible distance, climbing a summit, or trying to build a flying machine.

The selection of works in "Atlas, Plural, Monumental," curated by CAMH curator Dean Daderko, begins in the early nineties. From 1993 to 1994, Ramirez Jonas rebuilt a series of early 20th-century kites designed as early prototype flying machines. Created by inventors and tinkerers ahead of the invention of the airplane, these mechanisms embody the quest and search for flight encapsulated by inventors Alexander Graham Bell and Joseph LeCormu. Remade using simple everyday materials, Ramirez Jonas's faithfully reproduced kites are altered only with the addition of a disposable camera. By attaching a means of recording both proof of the ascent into the air and the view from above, Ramirez Jonas does more than reenact a moment of the past; he enables a transmission. The kite's photographs show the tether of Ramirez Jonas's hand, outstretched to the sky, conveying the essential and collective desire the inventors had to achieve flight.



"Paper Moon (I Create as I Speak)," 2008, Paul Ramirez Jonas, Framed inkjet prints on paper, music stand, amplifier, and microphone, Dimensions variable
Photos: courtesy the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler

In another retracing, this one on paper, Ramírez Jonas called the WorldTex travel agency and requested a schedule of flights that would most closely align with Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe. The work, *Magellan's Itinerary* (1995), presents us with an itinerary of arrivals and departures printed on a dated dot-matrix printer. Rather than an actual journey, the work exists as a potential score, the possibility of its fulfillment left open and available to all. As evidenced by these early works, the act of reading in Ramírez Jonas's work is one of constant discovery. And who hasn't returned to a beloved book or familiar story, only to uncover something new and unexpected. Yet, in making visible, physical objects from his reading-turned-action, Ramírez Jonas is doing more than simply sharing an experience or story; he is bridging the past and the present, creating a new channel of communication.

What's more, the gesture of what he chooses to replicate or retrace is also important. Interested in making space in the narrative of history for voices and stories often overlooked or forgotten, Ramírez Jonas reminds us of the role of the individual in the creation of larger publics and communities. This notion of how we, as individuals, come together to create public space is especially evident in the artist's work produced after 2005. Expanding on the exchange provided by his scores, Ramírez Jonas began to address new forms of participation, asking and inviting the audience to complete and create the work with him.

In *Mi Casa, Su Casa* (2005), he gave a local lecture in the Tijuana/San Diego border area that presented expanded portraits of people who

lived there. The lecture introduced people on either side of the border to one another, detailing who they were, what they did, and where they lived, all through an exhaustive explanation of the various keys on their keychain. After each talk, the audience was invited to exchange their keys with Ramirez Jonas and with each other. The lecture ended with Ramirez Jonas saying, "I have been thinking of trust and keys, so I am going to take the key to the front door of my house and I am going to duplicate it onto one of these keys," running it through the duplicating machine. "And now that it is done I am going to offer it to anyone in the audience. You can have this key and I am going to trust you with my key, but you are going to have to give me something in return. You have to now choose a key from your keychain and let me duplicate it and in turn I am going to offer it to someone else in the audience. They can exchange it again if they allow me and so on and so forth."



Documentation of "Taylor Square," 2005
Commissioned by the Cambridge Arts Council's Public Art Program. Photo: courtesy the artist

In a similar act of trust and exchange, in the same year, Ramirez Jonas created a permanent work: a small park called *Taylor Square* (2005) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Five thousand keys to the park's gate were mailed to the homes closest to the square, with a note that simply said, "Here is your key. It is one of 5000 keys that opens Taylor Square, Cambridge's newest park. The park and the keys are a work of public art that I made for you. The park has barely enough room for a bench and a flagpole; please accept this key as its monument. Add it to your keychain along with the keys that open up your home, vehicle or workplace. You now have a key to a space that has always been yours. Copy it and give it away to your neighbors, friends and visitors. Your sharing will keep the park truly open."

This scenario of shared ownership endows the key not just as an art object, but also as a vehicle for social contract. Meaning is ascribed through interaction and participation, emphasized and punctuated by the very act of sharing. In 2010, New York's Creative Time, in cooperation with the City of New York, commissioned Ramirez Jonas's large-scale public artwork *Key to the City* (2010). Reinventing the civic presentation of an ornamental key to the city—a symbolic honor usually bestowed on dignitaries, heroes, and celebrities—Ramirez Jonas created a master key, one that was able to unlock more than twenty different sites throughout New York City's five boroughs. This master key was replicated and exchanged with the public through small ceremonies, and people were encouraged to use their new key to explore and unlock parts of the city they had never seen before.



"Documentation from Key to the City," 2010 Paul Ramirez Jonas Commissioned by Creative Time in cooperation with the City of New York. Photo: courtesy the artist

Key to the City, *Taylor Square*, and *Mi Casa, Su Casa* all showcase Ramirez Jonas's commitment to creating transformative possibilities in the public sphere. Yet, while the focus of these three pieces centers around the key, it is the emphasis on exchange, action, and access that is at the root of the work. In *The Commons* (2011), the artist created a large equestrian statue, reminiscent of monuments commonly seen in public squares. Yet Ramirez Jonas's horse is without a rider, and rather than using marble or bronze, the piece is made entirely out of cork. With this porous material commonly associated with bulletin boards, *The Commons* functions as a place where the public can communicate directly with one another, sticking up fliers, messages and posters. Sharing becomes open and accessible, enabling a collapse

of the commonly understood parameters of private and public. Already installed outside of CAMH ahead of the opening of the exhibition, the piece has already been claimed by the neighborhood around it, instantly activated as a site of exchange.

In a 2011 panel discussion with Columbia University School of the Arts Dean Carol Becker and MoMA director Glenn Lowry, Ramírez Jonas said of his practice, “I didn’t become a public artist suddenly. It has been a very slow transformation... and words like participation, and what is a public and how is it formed, democracy, citizenship, are interesting, because it is almost inevitable that if you work in public space, you start to ask yourself these questions... And that is what has happened to me.” This progression is best evidenced in his ongoing and most recent project Public Trust (2016–ongoing), which questions how serious the promises we make to one another are. Originally presented in Boston, and soon to be installed at CAMH and activated every Saturday from 1-5 PM., the work invites participants to declare a promise that is then recorded in a drawing for them to keep. As part of the declaration, they are asked to swear—in a manner consistent with their own beliefs—that they will keep their word. Each promise is then published on a 16-foot marquee board to be seen by a larger public. This act of making a promise—something we often think of as a personal declaration or commitment—and making it public bridges the distance between the private individual and the larger public sphere.

“Atlas, Plural, Monumental” (on view at CAMH through August 6) comes at a time when the constructs of privacy, citizenship, and democracy are at the forefront of society, ever present in public discourse. The important dialogue around trust, access, and the exchange of information that Ramírez Jonas’s work brings to the surface could not be more apt for the time we find ourselves in. Yet what is perhaps most significant about his approach is how it ultimately reveals the power and importance of potential. It is not just what has happened, but what can happen that is important. The exhibition at CAMH has been built from an ongoing exchange between Ramírez Jonas and Daderko, one in which Daderko has been a witness and reader of—as well as participant in—almost all of the works in the show. This is a rare and fitting circumstance for an exhibition that in its construction necessitated its own method of revisiting and retracing steps. And what I think we can look forward to in “Atlas, Plural, Monumental” is the opportunity to traverse the dotted line of exchange that runs throughout Ramírez Jonas’s practice. Rife with moments of looking back to see forward, we will find a rich reading and retelling of an important artist’s practice, one that promises the potential for even more.

—COURTENAY FINN

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