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MUSEUMS

Paul Ramírez Jonas Asks What Constitutes a Public

In his much-deserved 25-year survey at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Ramírez-Jonas challenges conventional definitions of public art by openly asking what brings people together.



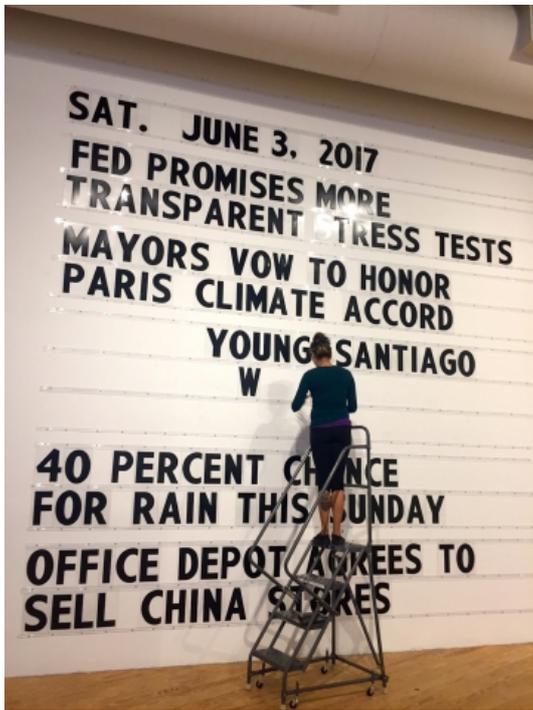
Jeanne Claire van Ryzin



A facilitator (center) makes a graphite rubbing of a pledge offered by a member of the public as part of Paul Ramírez Jonas’s “Public Trust,” (2016–ongoing). (all photos by Jeanne Claire van Ryzin for Hyperallergic)

HOUSTON — William was among the first visitors on a recent Saturday afternoon to step up to “Public Trust” (2016–ongoing), [Paul Ramírez Jonas’s participatory installation](#) at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) that invites anyone to make a personal promise by publicly declaring and recording it. “Public Trust” is part of [Atlas, Plural, Monumental](#), the artist’s much-deserved 25-year survey organized by CAMH curator Dean Daderko.

William sat down and pledged “to fail until it happened.” He added his signature and his inked thumbprint to the contract, a graphite rubbing made over a raised letter board. Then, with a ding of a desk bell,



A facilitator posts a pledge made by a Contemporary Arts Museum Houston visitor, part of Paul Ramírez Jonas's "Public Trust," (2016–ongoing).

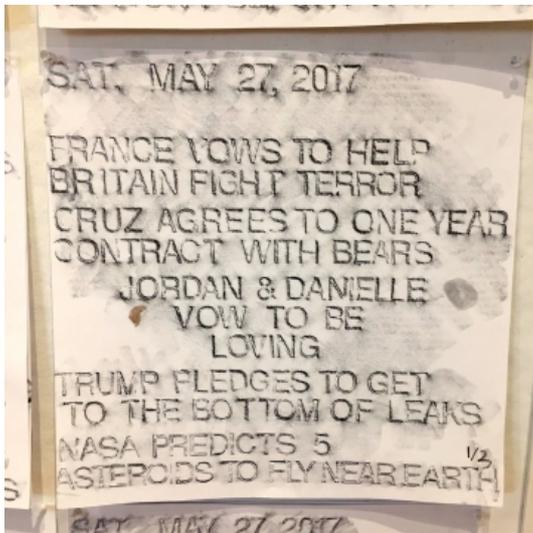
William finalized his promise, declaring “cross my heart and hope to die,” and watched as another facilitator put his pledge up in black plastic letters on an enormous marquee.

“Public Trust” debuted in [Boston in 2016](#) and was staged at three different public squares. Throughout his practice Ramírez Jonas has thoughtfully questioned

the boundaries between artwork and viewer. And he's challenged conventional definitions of public art by openly asking what constitutes "a public" and what brings people together.

It was delightful to see "Public Trust" as busy as it was in a museum setting. Visitors took part eagerly. The CAMH facilitators — local artists chosen by Ramírez Jonas — were engaged and thoughtful. "Public Trust" invites participants to consider the impact of their words — but only on Saturday afternoons at CAMH. The rest of the time, not staffed with facilitators, "Public Trust" is inactive.

Much of Ramírez Jonas's work is site-specific and engages the public in a



Graphite rubbing of a pledge made by participants in Paul Ramírez Jonas's "Public Trust," (2016-ongoing). Each participant keeps a copy and a second copy is displayed in the museum.

variety of ways. And thus, much of what's in the exhibit is essentially records (photographs, video, explanatory text) about artwork that already took place. That makes a fair part of the experience of *Atlas*, *Plural*, *Monumental* akin to surveying an archive and imaginatively connecting a few objects with residual information. Which isn't at all an unpleasant activity. But it does provoke a question: With today's proliferation of

performance, social practice,
time-based and participatory
public art, how best to
present such artwork after
the fact and in the confines
of a traditional museum
setting?

Daderko gives it noble
curatorial effort. *Atlas, Plural,
Monumental* is thorough in its
chronological presentation of
Ramírez Jonas's oeuvre,
offering a robust picture of
the artist's diverse practice.



Paul Ramírez Jonas, “The Commons”
(2011), cork, pushpins, steel, wood, and
hardware (image courtesy the artist and
Galeria Nara Roesler)

Daderko put Ramírez Jonas’s large cork sculpture, “The Commons” (2011), modeled after Rome’s landmark “Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius,” center stage in the CAMH’s rambling and awkwardly shaped main gallery. Ramírez Jonas erases the emperor from his version of “Equestrian Statue,” democratizing the immutable monument. Instead, the riderless cork horse tops a base that functions as a public bulletin board. At CAMH, visitors have covered it with diverse messages: drawings, Polaroid selfies, business cards, notes, and ticket stubs from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston across the street (the CAMH has always had free admission). There’s a

poster for a free yoga class and a program from a funeral service, too. “The Commons” may not be that rigorous or complex a piece, but it is very engaging.



Kites from Paul Ramírez Jonas’s
“Heavier than Air” (1993-94) series

At the beginning of his practice Ramírez Jonas plumbed history, choosing scientific accomplishments (experiments in flight, the first moon landing) and understanding those historic events as “scores,” riffing on them like a jazz musician. That riff is affectionate in “Heavier than Air” (1993–94), a series for which Ramírez

Jonas faithfully replicated kite prototypes designed during the optimistic era of the early 1900s when myriad inventors competed to make a flying machine. Ramírez Jonas fitted his kites with an alarm clock rejiggered to depress the shutter of a single-use disposable camera. Just like the Wright Brothers, the artist launched his kites at the beach. But when the timer went off, the camera captured blurry pictures of Ramírez Jonas below. At CAMH, those blurry photos hang near the kites, proof that the designs of the early inventors still function.



Paul Ramírez Jonas, “His Truth Is Marching On” (1993), wood, glass bottles, corks, water, mallet, rope, and hardware (The Dikeou Collection, Denver)

Another charismatic early piece is “His Truth is Marching On” (1993), a hanging chandelier of water-filled, clear wine bottles. Amid the bottles hangs a mallet that visitors can use to tap the bottles in a counter-clockwise direction, causing the successive musical notes to play “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which is also the melody of the 19th-century abolitionist song “John Brown’s Body” and the early labor union anthem “Solidarity Forever.” The tune of each song is the same. Ramírez Jonas prods us to recall that history.

Some of Ramírez Jonas’s most affecting works in the



Detail of Paul Ramírez Jonas, “Assembly: Ghazi Stadium” (2013), silk screen and collage on paper (image courtesy the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler)

exhibit are also some of the most discrete. The “Assembly” (2013) drawing series features hand-printed and colored silk-screen tickets that enumerate the capacity of meeting places: the United States Supreme Court Chamber, an Atlantic City boxing venue, La Scala opera house. Ramírez Jonas lays out the tickets to represent the seats of each venue, mapping the

taxonomy of places for public assembly. The massive “Assembly: Ghazi Stadium” (2013), for instance, uses different colored tickets to represent the 25,000 bodies that can be seated in the Kabul, Afghanistan stadium. Ghazi Stadium is a venue for soccer games and other sports. But during Taliban rule in the 1990s, the stadium was the site of public executions.



Paul Ramírez Jonas, “Assembly: Ghazi Stadium” (2013), silk screen and collage on paper (image courtesy the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler)

With “Assembly: Ghazi Stadium,” Ramírez Jonas suggests there are different means of public participation. Beyond the fundamental human need for connection — fostered through the artist’s participatory pieces — there’s an imperative to participate in the public forum. How else can people claim that forum a democratic space?

Paul Ramírez Jonas: Atlas, Plural, Monumental *continues at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) (5216 Montrose Boulevard, Houston, Texas) through August 6.*