



Paul Ramirez Jonas: Public Trust

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Public Trust in Copley Square, Boston, MA. Photo: Olivia J. Kiers

By Olivia J. Kiers

Internationally acclaimed artist Paul Ramirez Jonas has returned to Boston this summer following his 2005 Cambridge-based project, *Taylor Square*. *Taylor Square* operated through public participation; Ramirez Jonas mailed 5,000 gate keys to residents living near the minuscule, enclosed-yet-public Taylor Square park and encouraged them to copy and share those keys, thus creating a real sense of public ownership for the park. Likewise, *Public Trust* exists through public engagement.

Elements of Ramirez Jonas' new work are spectacular—in both senses of the word. A 16 x 16 foot marquee, installed in rotation in Dudley, Kendall and Copley squares (in Roxbury, Cambridge and Boston, respectively) for one week each, calls attention to selected “promises” of the day made by public figures and reported by the media. Clinton promises to pull all troops from Iraq. The weatherman promises rain. *Public Trust* is a visually striking work, yet that is only a fraction of its operative force. An almost ritualistic engagement with individual participants from the “private” sphere—locals, tourists, and other passers-by—creates the other spectacle, that of witnessing promises to oneself in a public space.

The holiday tradition of making a New Year's resolution is as widespread as the tacit understanding that these resolutions are often broken by the end of January. *Public Trust* asks its audience, as individuals, stop and reconsider the value of their own word. The interactive aspect digs deep into the mechanics of promise-making through a multi-step process that, with the help of Ramirez Jonas' team, involves first the decision to make a promise, then writing and signing a “contract,” witnessing the promise, and placing that personal promise on the billboard along with those public pronouncements culled from the daily news. Each step can be personalized. You can sign your contract with a thumbprint, your signature, or even with a drop of blood. You may choose to witness it by swearing on a holy text or performing a handshake. This mixing of individual choice with ritual lends an archaic gravity to the act of promising that is usually absent from the flippancy of our everyday statements, well-meaning though they may be. Personal promises have ranged from “I will help my mom out more” to “I pledge to bring a dance party to the office.”



Public Trust in Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA. Photo courtesy Now + There.

What Ramirez Jonas has achieved with *Public Trust*, whether intentional or not, is a reinvention of the sliding scale at which people value each other's word. While they crowd daily news headlines, those grandiose promises by public officials and politicians are suddenly empty, unconvincing alongside the more mundane and achievable resolutions of the artwork's "average" participants. The publicly witnessed personal promises become heroic in the face of the world. Furthermore, while spectacular, there is little voyeurism to this piece. Even as vulnerable hopes and dreams are made blatantly public, it is through an act of willful participation, the first step towards positive difference. We all want to see changes made, either in our own lives or in our communities; *Public Trust* helps us to understand that we can—and should—trust ourselves to be change's foot soldiers.

Public Trust, a project hosted by the non-profit, public arts organization Now + There, is on view in Copley Square through September 17. Visit publictrustboston.com for details.

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