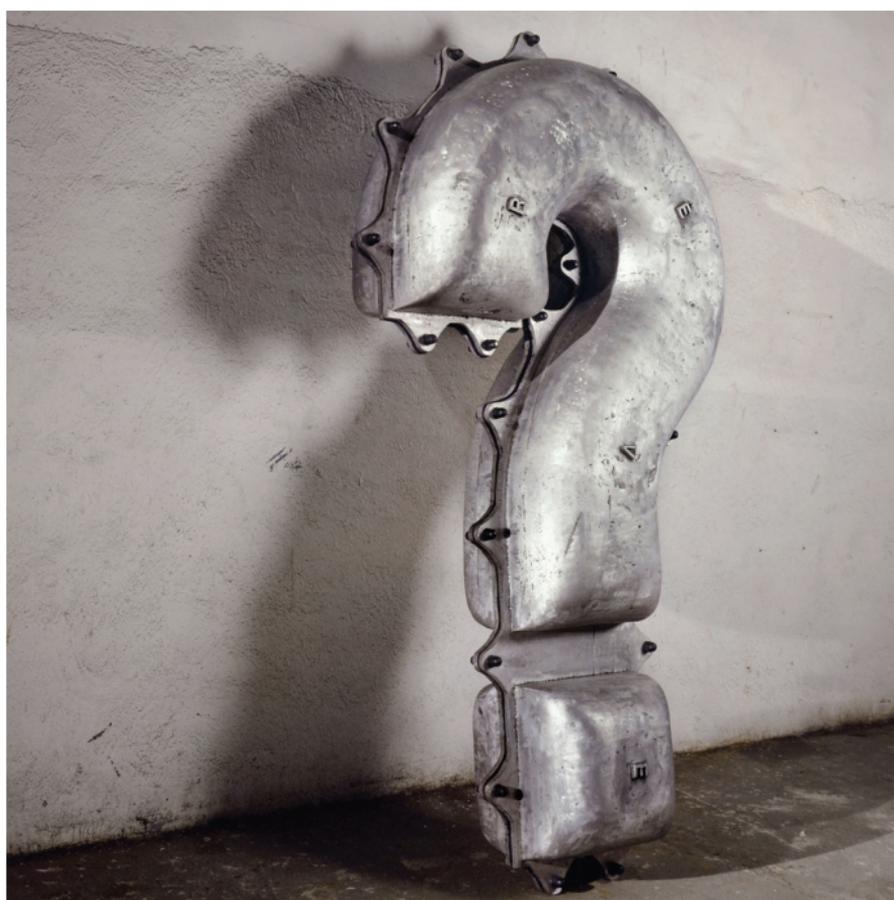


# JAUME PLENSA

Exhibition from 1 December 2018 to 22 April 2019



Jaume Plensa, *Firenze II*, 1992. Photo: Laura Medina@PlensaStudioBarcelona.  
VEGAP, 2018



JAUME PLENSA has often said that sculpture is an ideal way of posing questions. *Firenze II* (1992), the work that marks the start of Plensa's exhibition at MACBA, is a huge question mark that leans against the wall. We stand before the interrogative itself. The sign '?' reminds us that, every time we use it, a statement becomes a question. Isn't that precisely one of the functions of sculpture? Keeping up uncertainty, celebrating imprecision? Generating perplexity, hesitation, unsureness? Inspiring suspicion, increasing incredulity, sowing scepticism?

Endowed with an immense capacity for production, Plensa continues to construct a way of looking at the world that serves to explore its internal relations. Sure of the capacity of his work to transform, he scrupulously argues his conclusions. At all times, he shows that he is acting freely. He dialogues fearlessly with the concept of beauty, which he does not always seek, but, when he does, it is with the utmost conviction. He does not display an ingenuous optimism, expressing, rather, the confidence that everything is possible. In his works he takes on the force of volume, of the image, of the word or of sound, without fearing the contradictions.

Plensa's exhibition at MACBA takes us on a journey through nearly three decades of his work. To access it, visitors must pass a large photograph of his studio, where models and sketches, materials and tools, notes and traces of a life accumulate. Following this, the itinerary offers a coherent entry into the artist's world and, for the first time in the history of MACBA, includes an outdoor space as though it were an additional gallery in that itinerary, with the installation of two works – *The Heart of Trees* (2007) and *The Heart of Rivers* (2016) – in the Museum's sculpture courtyard. In many ways, this unfolding corresponds with the artist's own way of working, having always alternated the use of indoor and outdoor spaces with remarkable dexterity. The unexpected often arises from the tensions generated between opposites: weight and lightness combine in the material presence of a metal that aspires to weightlessness, sometimes resting on a single point, and at others not even touching the ground.

This tension through opposition emerges forcefully in *Mémoires Jumelles* (1992), a work composed of eleven Acrow props, metal supports tensed horizontally between two facing walls that support everyday objects, probably from the work environment of the artist himself, that has been cast in bronze, and which the viewer must pass under. The whole is held up by tension, by the force of the sculpture itself. Like all of the artist's sculptures, it does not occupy a space so much as generate another, and it does so by means of pressure and the distance brought into play by the objects.

Similarly, sound and silence are opposed and alternated. If sound accompanies the visit to the exhibition, then it is sound created by the oscillation of material, sculpture that vibrates and penetrates the public's mind through their ears. In *Matter-Spirit* (2005), it is the visitor who hits the piece with a mallet. In this way, not only do they activate it, they also announce their presence to others in the gallery. *Rumor* (1998) materialises the spirit of the William Blake poem from which it takes its inspiration. A drop of water, light and minimal, creates a sound that literally fills the entire space. *Glückauf?* (2004), with its tinkling of metal letters, generates a hum thanks to the movement of people and air. The murmur of *Dante's Dream* (2003) is similar to that of a monastic cloister. As a counterpoint, other pieces speak with the power of the absence of sound. *Silence* (2016) offers a space where it is not necessary to speak. Its protagonist operates from a place of utmost serenity and invites the spectator to do the same in a beautiful balance that finds its natural place in calm. *Self-Portrait with Music* (2017) is presented as a thunderous silence: by means of musical notation, it fills the space with multiple melodies. Plensa's work conceals numerous references to poetry, music and science. *Islands III* (1996) is a good summary of his personal references, such as the glass bottles enclosed, in turn, in resin prisms that seem to conserve their concentrated essences with the utmost security.

Plensa's work is full of references to art itself: from the classical to the Conceptual tradition, from the Renaissance to the historical avant-garde movements. Some, like Duchamp, are quite patent. Plensa dialogues with the art and the artists of the past, taking their intellectual and formal legacy as raw material. But at the same time, he is also an artist who reviews social and cultural history in order to cast light on individuals and societies. Plensa has, throughout his career, engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the history of ideas, especially with modernity as the moment in which the present time is set. The big story was solid with no cracks and, at its peak, projected the European order onto the whole world. It was an ideological project that spread through the various areas of human activity: economic and military, of course, but also scientific, cultural and spiritual. It prioritised individualism over the collective, based on the definition of an apparent legal parity and equal opportunities that were, ultimately, unfulfilled promises. It maintained its faith in social development through technological and scientific progress, in the confidence that people would always live better lives. It promoted the advance of capitalism as the only valid economic model, trusting to growth as the driving force of progress.

It is in this context that we must understand *Dallas? ... Caracas?* (1997), which questions all possible modernities by means of the contrast between two cities with almost parallel histories that have become almost opposite symbols. Both are symbols of cities that have believed in the promises of modernity and that proposed to their inhabitants a horizon of progress thanks to the extraction of oil. And both, also, are scenarios of disappointment at the failure of their expectations. Plensa presents these two cities by means of some two hundred photographs taken in domestic kitchens. There are no people in them. Just furniture, fittings and some foodstuffs. We believe we can distinguish which ones are taken in each city. They share the basics: the place where food is prepared, the same food that will later become a part of our organism.

The body as a representation of the human is constantly present in Plensa's work. First of all, with his own measurements. This is not a new theme in art. Greek art set forth its canon. Leonardo da Vinci drew *Vitruvian Man* as a study of the ideal proportions of the body, establishing the relations between the various parts of the anatomy that could be projected metaphorically to the entire world. Le Corbusier, the architect who believed in modernity, proposed his Modulor. Plensa proposes Plensa. He goes for the simple and the honest. The height of *Mémoires Jumelles* is that of the artist with upraised arms; it is his body that is outlined in *Continents I and II* (2000); *The Heart of Trees* and *The Heart of Rivers* show the artist crouched, hugging trees whose dimensions are ideal for his body. But the presence of the individual, of his body and his soul, goes much further. It is present in each and every one of his works; if we had to define Plensa in just one way, this could be it: the sculptor of the human.

It is also in the organic accumulation of *Tervuren* (1989), which recalls Artaud's words: 'Where it smells of shit, it smells of being.' The immense spherical shape leaves no doubt about its referent. An essential human product, useless, malodorous and distasteful, but fundamental to our life and to generating more life. Similar to art: something that no one knows exactly what its use is – it has none, it has them all – apparently unproductive, but essential for creating other works of art. Here, it appears in the form of a sphere of human dimensions, heavy, forceful, textured.

The reference to the human makes a radical appearance, too, in *Glückauf?*, with the literal text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Inspired by the French Revolution of 1789 (modernity crosses our path once again), it alludes to a great 'human family'. Even today, the text is a promissory, distant aspiration. It is arrayed in full, occupying the central space of the largest gallery in the exhibition. It is a portrait that the visitor can walk through. It displays humankind in its most fundamental aspiration: the defence of its dignity and respect for all its potential. Today's Europe, a Europe that is plunged into contradictions, between the rise of fascism and the resistance of a large sector of its population (the same sector that is outraged when people trying to cross the Mediterranean are allowed to die), is compelled to demand compliance with human rights around the globe. Here, they occupy a space, calling us with their sound, forcing the spectator to read, understand and become aware of their declaration.

We live in intense, confusing times. On the one hand, we are seeing the dehumanisation of the public sphere. Art and culture are under pressure to find a comfortable, uncommitted place, one of soft, easy consensus. It is an apparently tempting place, but it is crowded. There you can find everything from mere celebration of form to pure entertainment: pleasing but totally unsatisfactory destinations. On the other, a need cries out: the search for new conquests, new strongholds to gain. They are not ours, and we have to conquer them inch by inch. This means providing ourselves with spaces where we can live life in common and explore formulas for effective emancipation. There, imprecisely arranged, dreams, desires, potentials and new goals emerge.

The great story of modernity began with little space for questions, particularly ones with no immediate answer. Initially it offered solid evidence, but later turned out to have cracks. Re-emerging from these crevices come questions that corroborate the impossibility of absolute certainty. In Plensa, radical questioning and doubt find their way in and manifest themselves in even the most forceful of the cast works, in the immutable metal that has served to immortalise so many historical personalities and deeds. Perhaps this is why he points out that there is just one final stronghold of relative certainty: *Firenze II*, the work that opens the exhibition, is inscribed with the word *rêve*, 'dream', the place beyond consciousness where fear and desire become image. The dream, like art, draws us closer to the answer to a question that is never explicitly formulated. There is no dream without desire, but without a dream there are only question marks drawn in the air. We find ourselves, once again, faced with the question itself.

---

Exhibition organised and produced by MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

**Curated by**  
Ferran Barenblit

### Publication

The book *Jaume Plensa* focuses on a photographic tour by Anne Pöhlmann of the exhibition that occupies the galleries of MACBA. This tour is accompanied with essays by Ferran Barenblit, Clare Lilley, Catherine Millet and Hèctor Parra. The book is published in three separate editions: Catalan, Spanish and English. Available from February 2019.

---

### Guided visits

Included in the admission price. See times and languages at [macba.cat](http://macba.cat).

### Accessible visits

Hearing accessibility (Catalan)  
Sunday 16 December, 12 noon

Friends of MACBA

### Exclusive guided visit to the exhibition with Ferran Barenblit

Wednesday 12 December, 6 pm

### Let's talk about...

#### Jaume Plensa

With Ferran Barenblit  
Saturday 1 December, 6 pm

### MACBA App

Install our app and enjoy extra explanatory material on the exhibition *Jaume Plensa*, as well as detailed information on a selection of works in the MACBA exhibitions, videos, curiosities and all the practical information for visiting the Museum.



iOS



ANDROID

---

### With the support of



Julius Bär



### With the collaboration of



Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona

---

### Opening times

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 11 am to 7.30 pm  
Tuesday closed  
Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm  
Sunday and public holidays, 10 am to 3 pm

Every Saturday, from 4 to 8 pm, entrance to the Museum is free.

The Museum entry ticket is valid for a month. Activate it at the ticket desk and visit us as often as you like.

### MACBA

#### Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Plaça dels Àngels, 1  
08001 Barcelona  
[macba.cat](http://macba.cat)

### Follow us



#JaumePlensa

**Become a Friend of MACBA from 15 € per year.**

### Media sponsors

