

From Creative Energy to the Conformation of a Sculptural Spacetime: Musical Tension in the Work of Jaume Plensa

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Jaume Plensa's studio, 2018

When we draw close to physically touch some of the latest works by Jaume Plensa, we become trapped in a chimeric and imaginary space, opened in the incommensurable abyss that lies between the vibrant, intimate concentration of the weightless female face and the brutally stony nature of the basalt with which it is made. This world that opens up to us between reason and dream, between the living and the inert, between energy and material, invites us to submerge ourselves, humbly and naturally, in a silence of musical qualities which is the subject of analysis here. We should close our eyes to allow the emergence of an inner space of reflection, of vibration with oneself, of listening to the organic murmur that keeps us alive, and which, in turn, urges us to continue an existential quest beyond what our fears and our instincts initially allow us to glimpse. Because a creative mind is a mind that listens and embraces with pain and suffering, but also with pleasure, the conflicts and the internal contradictions characteristic of the tragic condition inherent to our species. This listening offers us an opportunity to attain artistic or scientific achievements, perceived as new paths that take us closer to the beauty and the unattainable complexity of nature.

One of the tragic features of the human condition is the individual and collective difficulty of accepting the extreme tension between genetic-based impulses and cultural conditioning factors. According to Michael S. Gazzaniga, our brain is a machine adapted to the hunter-gatherers who lived in small groups and adverse environments, which has not yet adapted to life in today's large social organisations.¹ With his creations, Plensa ventures to explore this open wound at the very centre of our personal

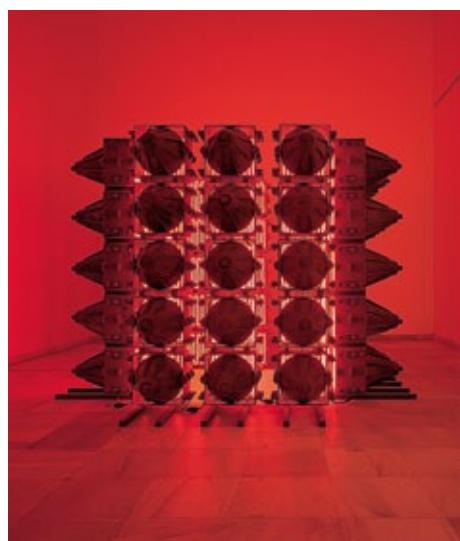
1. Michael S. Gazzaniga, *¿Qué nos hace humanos?* Madrid: Espasa Libros, SLU, 2010. Originally published in the United States as *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.

identity. Indeed, on various occasions he has said that the brain is the wildest place in our body, a dark, damp place, full of hidden corners.² In his work, the expression of this fracture often takes the form of dual or opposing elements that come into friction and interact dialectically, like bodily fluids of antithetical connotations (semen and blood), or the presence/absence of acoustic elements in the space of expression (sound and silence).

It is fascinating to realise how close can be the aesthetic intuition of the artist and the scientist's insight at the moment of creative conception of a work of art or a scientific theory. In the lecture 'How I created the Theory of Relativity' delivered at the University of Kyoto in 1922, Albert Einstein explained that while sat in the patent office in Berne, suddenly this idea came to him: when a person falls freely he does not feel his own weight. This simple idea fascinated him and made such a deep impression that he later described the revelation as the happiest thought of his life.³ Einstein makes it quite clear that it was an idea, an intuition involving his own body (in free fall, perhaps in a lift), that generated a series of irresolvable contradictions with Newton's theory of gravitation, which was still accepted at the time. What we feel as weight is today understood as the electromagnetic perpendicular force that the atoms of the earth exerts against those of our body, blocking our free fall in the Earth's gravity well.

Whether in a lift in free fall, in an orbital station or inside Jaume Plensa's capsules (*Song of Songs III and IV* [2004]), we can experience the sensation of freedom felt when following a geodesic, not subject to any force.

The work *La Neige Rouge* (1991) is one of the clearest examples of how material, cast iron in this case, is transformed into pure light and energy when it loses its opacity and the texture that give us the sensation of weight associated with mass. To quote Plensa: '[...] when you think about material, you don't need to think about weight; you can also think about energy. In my work, I like to



La Neige Rouge, 1991

2. Jaume Plensa, *El cor secret. Entrevistes*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2016, pp. 61 and 111. English edition: *The Secret Heart. Interviews*. Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2016.

3. Hanoch Gutfreund and Jürgen Renn, *The Road to Relativity*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 45.

transform energy into an object that fills space.⁴ The concept of *La Neige Rouge*, then, connects with the paradigmatic equivalence between mass and energy ($E=mc^2$), at the same time that, instead of focusing on the sculptural material as an end in itself, it makes it the necessary means to transform the space around it. A second nexus, then, with Einstein's fundamental gravity equation that describes how matter-energy warps spacetime.

In the case of works like *Song of Songs III and IV*, spacetime and its perception by the observer are the direct object of Plensa's efforts. He is enchanted by the attitude adopted by both the creator and the observer when they find themselves before a material, but even more fascinated by the true stuff of sculpture, which consists of ideas that he perceives as energy emanating from objects, spaces and persons.⁵ Here, it is interesting to compare how two of the most important classical references for Plensa – Michelangelo

and Velázquez – transcend matter, coming at it from different directions. Whereas the Italian artist dissolves or conceals his brushstroke in a massive pictorial texture of unquestionably sculptural qualities, and, in his sculptures, the mineral quality of the marble is transcended by the idea of subtraction from the block carefully selected and prepared in Carrara, in Velázquez's case, the extreme sensation of vivacity and real presence is achieved by means of the musical plasticity of his open, palpable brushstrokes, lucidly and soberly applied. Who better than Antoni Tàpies to make us see the value that Velázquez gives to the quality of pictorial material as a basis to be transcended: 'Close up, we clearly see the subtlety of this disturbing artist: the way he weaves together colours that say so much with so little, a kind of agitation of the void, a force field that incarnates ineffable absolute reality, and, furthermore, without spectacular situations, with the most intimate, everyday approach.'⁶



Song of Songs III and IV, 2004

4. Plensa, *El cor secret*, op. cit., p. 73.

5. Ibid., p. 116

6. Antoni Tàpies, 'Velázquez o l'agitació del buit', *L'experiència de l'art*. Barcelona: labutxaca, 2010.

Winner of the Velázquez Prize 2013, Plensa is a worthy heir and successor to his masters. As I pointed out above, in some of the best sculptures of recent years, like *Lou* (2014), the material comes to life thanks to the carefully articulated friction between the basalt in an apparent raw state and the sublime sculpted expression concentrated in the front openings of the face. The ears, by their absence, accentuate the need for an inner silence capable of embracing the vibrant world that comes from the outside, from totality. The lips and the nostrils are treated with a surprising anatomical, almost clinical precision, even as the sober sensuality of the lip muscles and nasal cartilage is highlighted. According to the lighting source, the forms, at once so familiar and so strange, reveal shades of poetic precision and oriental reminiscences that draw unsettling, almost musical undulations on the face. By contrast, the eyes are surprisingly indistinct, almost blurred, as though slightly moist: so it is that the windows to the soul reverberate, allowing us to penetrate into the interior of this world-face. The eyes of *Lou* suggest a concentration and an inner listening to intrinsically musical qualities that lead us to perceive this quasi-totem as a source of energy, of vibration, permanently expanding into the space around it.

We know that, as a boy, when his father played the piano, Plensa would hide inside it (it was an upright piano with openings at the bottom) and spend hours feeling the vibrations of the strings and the air percussing his body. Thanks to this ongoing experience he has developed an internal ear that is especially attentive to the physiological sounds produced by the human body. In *Love Sounds* (1998), Plensa sees art as a sound that emanates from the body:⁷ ‘the femoral artery produces a tantric kind of sound, whereas the jugular vein is reminiscent of the sound of the wind.’ In *World Voices* (2010), the drops of water falling onto the 196 cymbals create variable rhythms and almost musical cadencies programmed by computer. Accordingly, in certain passages of *Breathing* (2015), a choral work for twelve solo voices on poems by Plensa, I explore the physics of beat tones, perceptible variations in sound amplitude caused by the intervallic friction of two voices that are very close:

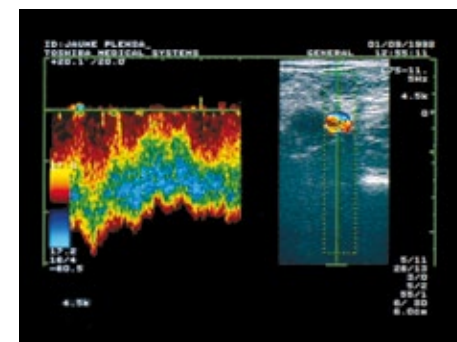
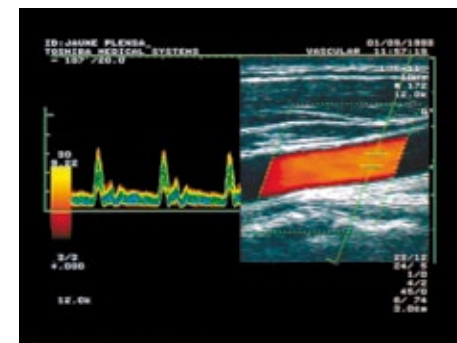
7. Plensa, *El cor secret*, op. cit., p. 87.



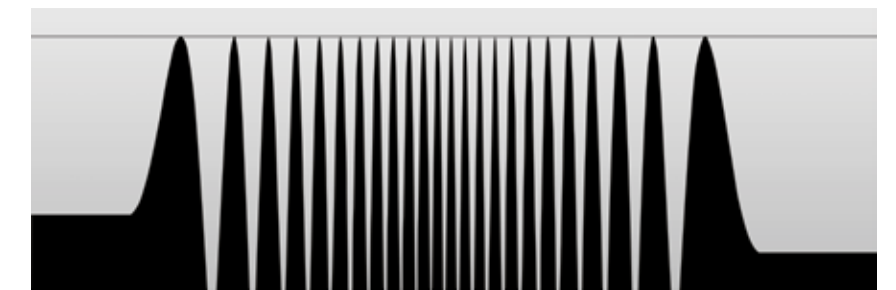
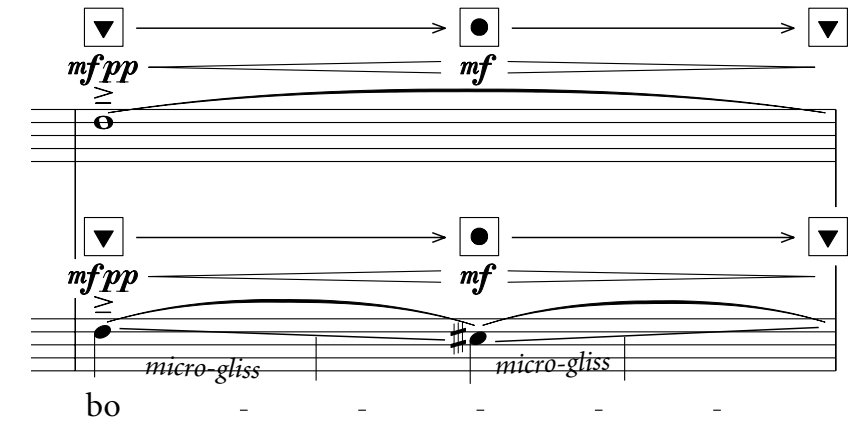
Lou, 2014 (detail)



Love Sounds, 1998 (detail)



Graphics for the book *Love Sounds*, 1999



Hèctor Parra, *Breathing*, 2015. Published by Durand, Paris, 2016. Simplified analysis of the waveform of the corresponding fragment.

The theoretical physicist David Bohm proposed a revealing and quite similar vision of what Plensa sees as a vibrant, interconnected whole. Bohm proposes an understanding of physical reality as a unified, indivisible field. Fundamental particles are considered localised regions where this field is very intense. As we move away from the centre of this more intense region, the field of the particle weakens and merges almost imperceptibly with the fields of other particles. It is, then, unthinkable to consider existence as constituted of separate basic components such as atoms or elementary particles. Everything is interconnected.⁸ A similar interconnection can be seen in the heads made of metal mesh (*Nuria*, 2007 and *Irma*, 2010) that Plensa installed for his exhibition in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. At some points, the mesh is very dense and tight, at others it is much more lightly built. At the same time, the irregular mesh affects the view that we have of the surrounding reality, particularly the fragment of

8. David Bohm, *Sobre la creatividad*. Barcelona: Editorial Kairós, 2015. Originally published in the United Kingdom as *On Creativity*. London: Routledge Classics, 1998.



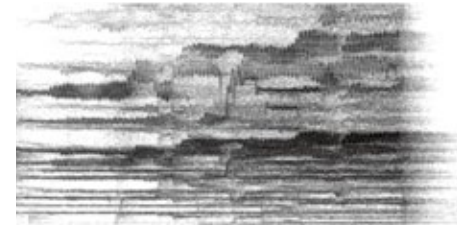
Nuria, 2007 and Irma, 2010

landscape that is covered by the sculptures, which appears distorted. Here, Plensa says that this work is a question of mathematical, almost musical harmony. The mesh captures reality, which thereby becomes a vital element of the form.⁹

In the field of experimental music, a new paradigm for analysing the sound phenomenon has gradually emerged: spectromorphology. This theory includes the dynamic study of all acoustic phenomena,

seeing music as the force field produced by the interaction of varying degrees of complexity and multidimensionality between the evolution of the spectrum – the timbre – and amplitude in time. The composer and theoretician Denis Smalley, in a way an heir to Pierre Schaeffer, the father of concrete music, suggests that we can model, from the microscale to the macroscale, a whole series of characteristic forms of dynamic evolution that, together with the corresponding spectral tensions, make up the fundamental pillars of musical structure. While the evolution of the discourse in classical music was based on the refined gradation of the tension between thematic structure and harmonic architecture based on the tonal system, once the thematic character was atomised and the tonal system dissolved in the early twentieth century, a new world opened up, full of possibilities. From the twenties to the seventies, the partial or complete serialisation of many of the classical musical parameters (pitch, rhythm, dynamics) dominated musical creation, but the parallel development of electronic music started to bring about a deep-seated change in paradigm: the fact of conceiving music directly in terms of a profound interaction between the dimensions of energy and spectral colour freed composers from the paradigm models associated with traditional language. In this way, sound becomes a kind of acoustic sculpture that unfolds in time and affects our perception, sometimes in an atavistic way: ‘If I want to talk about silence, I won’t leave the gallery dark and

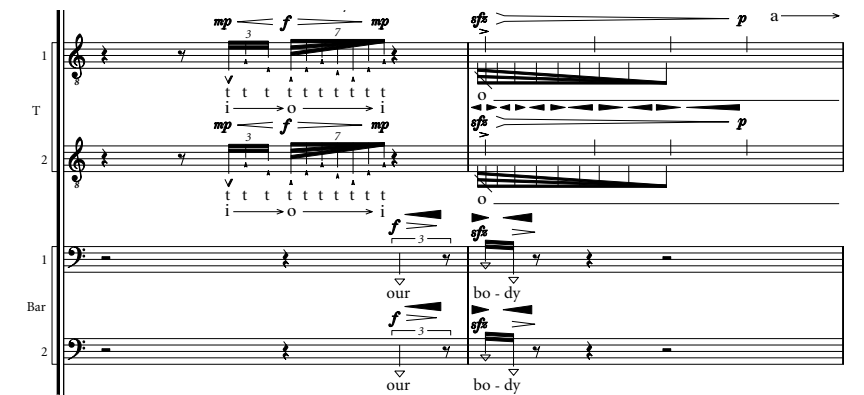
9. Interview by Catherine Millet, ‘Jaume Plensa. Faces of Memory’, *Jaume Plensa*. Milan: Silvana Editoriale; Saint-Étienne Métropole: Musée d’art moderne et contemporain, 2017, p. 82.



Hèctor Parra, *Breathing*, 2015, last page. Published by Durand, Paris, 2016.

silent. The best thing is to work with its opposite, the presence of sound!’ says Jaume Plensa.¹⁰ At the end of *Breathing*, after 25 minutes of constant musical development, and after the climax by accumulation of maximum density (as can be seen in the sonogram), silence emerges.

The body is the foundation of the conscious mind, and the structures of the proto ego are inextricably linked to the parts of the body that constantly bombard the brain with signals and are in turn bombarded by the brain, creating a resonant loop.¹¹ For Plensa, our thoughts are a vibration, one more noise made by our body. Thoughts musically embodied that I have tried to place in the vocal cords (or buccal cavity) of the twelve soloists of *Breathing*. The tenors articulate phonemes without using the vibration of their vocal cords – phonemes/noise that will later constitute the foundations of meaningful words. At the same time, the two baritones articulate the words ‘our body’ while sonorously breathing in and out, thereby endowing them with rhythm and a physiological quality. Musical passages such as this seek to question the relation between musical form and acoustic space by devocalising the singing:



Hèctor Parra, *Breathing*, 2015, page 97. Published by Durand, Paris, 2016.

We consider the work of sculpture or the musical score as global structures that the human spirit can only appropriate in the form of time flow. For Plensa, more than a problem of material and space, sculpture emerges as a problem of time and energy, positioning itself at the junction between rest and movement,

10. Plensa, *El cor secret*, op. cit., p. 60.

11. Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

between the absence of time and the permanent flow of time.¹² In the words of Jacques Monod, our evolution as a species in the biosphere is an irreversible process that defines a direction in time.¹³ But human beings, thanks to the development of consciousness, have the unique capacity to project themselves towards both the past and the future.¹⁴ In this respect, the complex, monumental nature of Plensa's work highlights the tense friction experienced by the artist between the mental flow of creation, often extremely fast and multiconnected, and its physical materialisation: 'Sculpture has a tempo that is always slower than that of the head', says the artist.¹⁵

12. Interview by Catherine Millet, 'Jaume Plensa. Faces of Memory', *Jaume Plensa*, op. cit.

13. Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972. Originally published in France as *Le Hasard et la nécessité*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970.

14. Gazzaniga, *¿Qué nos hace humanos?*, op. cit.

15. Plensa, *El cor secret*, op. cit., p. 187.



Jaume Plensa at the Atelier Calder, Saché, France, 1996