

August 25, 2017 - Born in California and raised in Honduras, Paul Ramírez Jonas currently lives, works, and teaches in New York City. His work challenges the boundaries between artwork and spectator by asking participants to contribute something—such as a penny, wish, or key—in order to fully engage with the piece. His work ranges from large-scale public installation and monumental sculpture to intimate drawings, performances, and videos. "I like that idea that it takes two to make a piece of art successful—the person making the image and the person viewing it," he says. "I'm really a believer in that. Art is that encounter between the thing that the artist made and the person taking in what the artist made. The meaning is made there. You need both parts of the equation."



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2425 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Education, Production, Adversity.

## Paul Ramírez Jonas on making work that interacts with the world

**You do a lot of different kinds of work involving a lot of different kinds of materials. What is your process usually? Do you work out of studio?**

Yeah. Believe it or not, I still have a studio practice. It's really evolved and that evolution has accelerated over the last few years, inadvertently, which is that now I do a kind of strange play acting with my assistant. It would be something like me saying to him, "What about making a piece with promises?" and gauging his reaction. I'm really interested in speech acts. I always think, "What kind of speech could I make a with promise?"

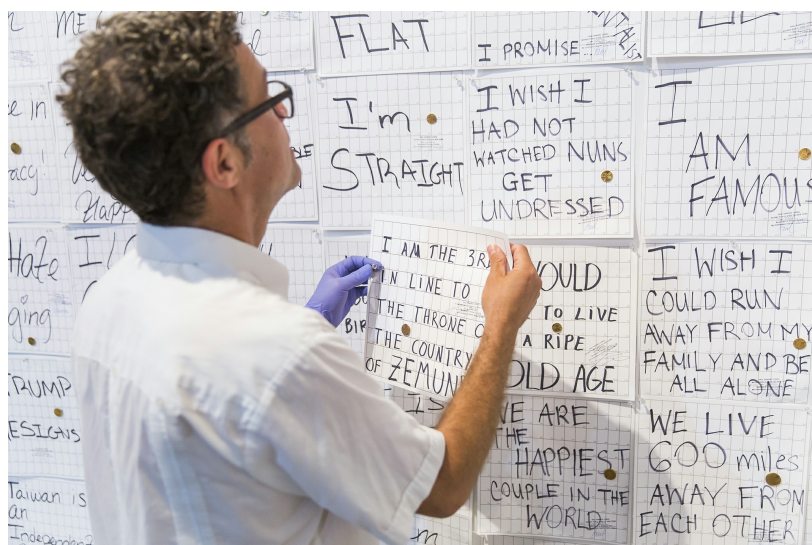
So it might start out with something really simple like, "Hey, make me a promise." You'll be like, "I promise to take you to the movies today." Then we'll be like, "Hmm, okay." Then we'll be like, "Maybe we need to swear over a sacred text," and then we'll go to the bookshelf and try to find an appropriate text to swear over. I call these little exercises rehearsals, and they're very short, but then we start to build with props around it. Then those props get more elaborate. Eventually it turns into a piece.

The studio still is super useful in that way because usually there's an object in these interactions. There's an object between the mediator and the participant, and that object is born in the studio. Then it goes into more traditional processes: "Oh, we should drill a few holes in this," or "Let's order a table and take it apart and take the legs, and let's get a piece of plywood and do *this* to it." It goes back and forth between a kind of performative aspect and then an actual building aspect.

**You make work that almost always involves some sort of participation or engagement from the viewer, which means there are a lot of different ways the experience can play out. In conceptualizing these pieces, you must have to think about all the different ways this interaction could go. Actually acting out the scenarios with another person makes a lot of sense.**

For some pieces what I think would be ideal is to almost go with a very theater-like approach and be like, "Now, we're going to go workshop it somewhere." I actually have done that with a few pieces. For example, the piece that is now at the New Museum—the piece where lies get turned into truth—that particular piece has been tried out already twice before in two different settings. You just can't predict how it's going to work when other people are involved. For example, I tried to be a software designer when I was an undergrad, and there's this thing that happens when you think something is totally obvious like, "People will click here." Then you show it to someone else and they're like, "I have no idea where to click!" You're like, "Right here, obviously," but they can't find it.

That's the major limitation with working on these things in a studio—you need to try with complete strangers at some point. You don't want to try with complete strangers for the first time on the day your show opens at the museum.



The amount of planning involved to execute your work, just in terms of material alone, is kind of staggering. You have to estimate number of people who can go through the exhibit in a single day and how many supplies you'll need in order for them all to take away a piece of paper or, say, to gold plate a penny for each person...

Oh yes. When I made "Key to the City", for example, we had this rehearsal in the studio where we went through the whole thing with a timer, and I've done that ever since. I actually go through the whole thing with a timer and then say, "Well, my best guess is that we'll do 127 of these a day, and then we'll be open for 30 days." Then you do the math, and then you're like, "Well, how much ink will the printer need, and how many pages will the ledger need? How many pennies can I gold plate?"

Then there's also things you can't predict, like wear and tear. I spent two years working on a piece at the Exploratorium, which is the interactive science museum in San Francisco. What's amazing is everything in the museum can be interacted with. It's kind of like their *thing*. It's amazing to see the amount of stuff that still breaks. It's like at any moment at the Exploratorium, a high percentage of exhibits are broken. Their shop is in the middle of the museum. They're just very open about it. They're like, "If the public can participate, things break." That's just part of it. I learned a lot from them, and I learned a lot from them also by iterative design, not to be afraid to put things out in front of people. You see what works. You modify it. You run it for a few more days. You modify it.

There's one part in my current show, a gambling table, that is probably the most propositional. I made it knowing that it would have to change throughout the run of the show. I'm meeting every week with the 14 high school teenagers who are the performers, and then we discuss, "How should we change it? What should the rules be? Do you want different text on these coins? What are people doing and not doing?" The work continues to evolve because of that.



**When you're doing this kind of work that involves interacting with people, how do you gauge success? Does it really depend on seeing it in play and seeing how people react?**

There's several camps in art, but I wonder if there's mainly two camps sometimes. There's a camp that's like, "The artist makes the work, and then the work is autonomous and the public does their thing." I'm a big fan of the *other* type. I think [Jorge Luis] Borges once said something like, "Poetry is not the poem in the book but it's the moment when someone grabs the poetry book in the library." I like that idea that it takes two to make a piece of art successful—the person making the image and the person viewing it. I'm really a believer in that. Art is that encounter between the thing that the artist made and the person taking in what the artist made. The meaning is made there. You need both parts of the equation.

When I used to make more traditional exhibition-based work, I never knew if the work was successful. You get a good review, and you're like, "Well, that's what the reviewer thinks." With this interactive work, it's sort of brutal because it either works or it doesn't and you know right away. You can't lie to yourself. People are either participating or they are not. I'm also very weary of a different kind of failure, which is people are participating but no meaning is being made. It's just like a thoughtless joyride. It has taken me some time to realize that you have to keep putting little opportunities for people to make meaning into the work.

I know when it works because I can see the conversation that arises from the participation. How do you gauge success? It's a tricky thing with art. Is it that the 14 high school students who will be working all summer being the facilitators, if it's transformative for them, is that successful enough? Or, if it's successful for one viewer, is that enough? Or, does it have to be foolproof and meaningful for every single person who passes through. I think a lot about these things. If I go to a restaurant, I expect the food to be good for every customer. For art, I don't know if you can expect the same thing.



**So many working artists are always working project-to-project: one thing is happening now but they're always thinking two steps ahead to the next thing they need to be working on or their next commission. Is there ever a time for you when it's just a totally blank slate and you can just go into your studio and say, "Okay, what are we doing today?"**

I think I'm about to enter that state right now for the first time in maybe over a decade. I feel like I actually don't have anything happening until January. It's a little bit by chance, and it's also a little bit by design. It just so happens that my daughter is applying to high school this year, and a friend of ours who's also an artist told us keep that entire year free in your schedule. For the last 12 months, I've slowly been engineering my schedule so my Fall and most of my Spring are empty, just to deal with the New York City high school application nightmare, but also so I can just sort of create a clean slate for myself.

**How does that feel?**

Oh, super scary. I'm the kind of person who can't take a vacation that's longer than three days because on the third day I freak out. So maybe call me in a month. I'll be having a mental breakdown.

**Some people really need to take breaks—to recharge their batteries and just live life for a while—while other artists I know don't need that at all, they never stop. Do you find that in between projects you need to think about something else or try to reset your dials in some way?**

I have a complicated life because I'm a parent and I also have a full-time job teaching. On top of that, I'm busy making projects. The cycle is pretty consistent. One of the things I do is I run. I'm a really avid runner. It's my secret passion. I run races, too. I'm completely mediocre, but I love that I'm never going to be good. Still, I do it pretty passionately. It just gives me that pause I need. I know that on Sunday I'll go on a run for two hours straight, no matter what. I've sort of had to build it into my life, those little pause moments where I'm recharging. I'm actually really looking forward to the next few months to see what happens, if I really slow down.

**Yeah. How does teaching fit into your creative life?**

I think it fits well. It keeps me open-minded. I think artists, certainly when you're younger, you try to hold a position often by demonizing the other position. The interesting thing about teaching is you start to encounter emerging artists who are doing things that are radically different than what you're doing, and they're nice people. As a teacher it's very hard to become the maverick or be too strident about what other people are doing because you're just always meeting people who do things that are completely different than you—and you respect and learn from them.

**Do you talk to your students about the realities of the art world? Is there a way to prepare them for that, or is the conversation always strictly about their work?**

I see it all the time, people are offended by the commerce of the art world. They're like, "I can't believe that terrible artist is making so much money, and this other great artist isn't making any!" It's like, well yeah, it's terrible, but it's also just a reality. I show my graduate students this lecture that completely depresses them where I go through these algorithms that rank artists. I show them the depressing reality which is that .01% of artists make a living at it. Then I start to show them graphs that show income distribution in the United States. Income inequality in the art world is exactly like the

income inequality of the country. The art world is *in* the world. It can't be better and it can't be worse than the world. It's in the actual world. It reflects it perfectly. It seems more extreme because it's smaller and we actually know some of the people, but it's really not dissimilar to the world at large.



That feels very helpful. Not to dissuade people from becoming artists, but it's important to go out into the world with eyes wide open regarding the reality you're dealing with if this happens to be your path in life.

I agree with you. I think there's too many of us, first of all. Also, you can't game the system. If you want to be an artist, why would you contort yourself to what you *think* is going to work commercially when the chances of success in doing that are so slim? You might as well stick to doing what you want to do. Then at least you have the reward of doing that, at least you have the reward of being true to yourself, of saying what you want to say, of being creatively honest.

Paul Ramírez Jonas recommends:

Film: Perfumed Nightmare (Mababangong Bangungot) by Kidlat Tahimik, a masterpiece from 1977. One of my all time favorite films, and dare I say it influence.

Music: Siembra (the whole album) by Rubén Blades and Willie Colón, released by Fania Records in 1978. I listened to it when I was 13 or 14 and it changed my life.

A place to go: the Hua Mei Bird Garden in lower Manhattan, on a Sunday, when it is warm, very early in the morning. I won't say more than that... it is worth going and observing what is going on for an hour or two.

Novel: Too many... but lately What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir by Haruki Murakami. Finally a book that talks about being an artist and a runner.

A Bar: Angel Share, go upstairs to Village Yokocho at 8 Stuyvesant St in Manhattan, there is an unmarked door, go in and you'll find a fantastic bar.

Name

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Vocation

Artist

Fact

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