

Transforming Energy



A Conversation with

Jaume Plensa



BY MICHAEL STOEBER

A young man once approached Jean Cocteau and asked the master what he should do to become a successful artist. Cocteau responded with three words: “Faites-moi étonner!” (“Amaze me!”) Looking at Jaume Plensa’s works, one gets the impression that he had been that young artist and had taken Cocteau’s recommendation to heart. The amazement of his sculptures begins with the different and often disparate materials that Plensa uses so gracefully and harmoniously. Not only steel and iron, bronze and brass, plastic and polyester, but also water and fire, light and darkness, sound and music, words and texts. Plensa was born in 1955 in Barcelona, where he still lives and works, except when he is in Paris, his second home. He has had numerous exhibitions all over the world, and his works can be found in museums and art institutes as well as in prominent public places. As a sculptor, he is less interested in defining space through weight and measure than he is in obtaining energy. For Plensa, sculpture means the spiritualization of matter, an interaction between mind and material. To achieve this, the concept of time becomes more important than that of space. Plensa’s time is filled with personal and collective remembrances, becoming a mirror for the everyman in ourselves and hence for the human condition.

Seven Deities of Good Fortune,
1999–2000. Glass, stainless steel,
wood, and light, 7 elements,
250 x 120–770 x 80–150 cm.
Work installed in Daikanyama,
Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan.



Michael Stoeber: *How did you come to art?*

Jaume Plensa: That's difficult to answer. My father played the piano and my mother was a singer for a while. So music and books were important at home, but not pictures. I wasn't good at music, but when I had problems or wished to be alone, sitting at the piano was a perfect way for me to hide. The darkness that surrounded me there and the smell of the piano taught me to experience space and music in quite a physical manner. My childhood memories revolve around music and books.

MS: *Did you turn to art because the visual played such a small role at home?*

JP: No, it was something else. You know, for years I wanted to become a doctor. I loved the body. In fact, I was obsessed by it. I had numerous medical books, which stimulated my imagination. But it was more a fantastic than a scientific interest. In the 18th century, people did wonderful etchings of the body, about the fluids inside and how the muscles worked. Later, I dreamed about becoming a writer. I even imagined myself as a musician. I wanted to be everything and everybody. Because I don't have the courage to be just one—that would be too difficult for me—art has probably allowed me to pursue all these aspirations.

MS: *To what extent were the books and the etchings important?*

JP: Books were important, but not in the way they may be for a conceptual artist. I loved the physical aspect of text. I remember leafing through books and being puzzled that while I was looking at one page, the previous page had already disappeared although it had just become part of me. I dreamed about transforming letters into something physical.

MS: *As you have repeatedly done in your later artistic work?*

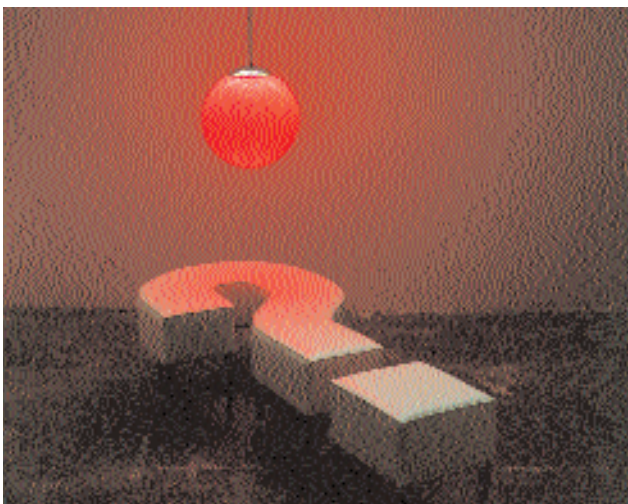
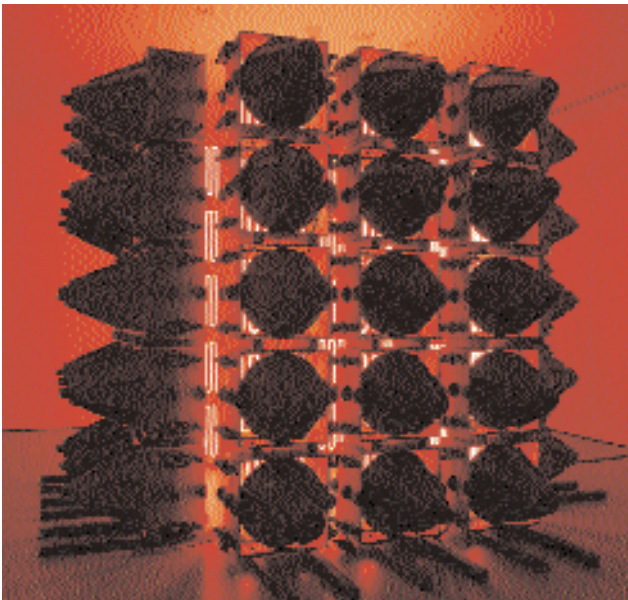
JP: Yes. In my works, words and letters are lent weight and volume. In this way they endure and don't vanish. You know that I work with the opera. Everything from my childhood re-appears in my art—the music, the books, the body. All of these elements are the essence of my work today.

MS: *The body has experienced a radical and fundamental change in your work in comparison to classical mimetic concepts. Why is this?*

JP: It has something to do with interaction. If you think about material, for example, you don't necessarily have to think about weight, you can instead think about energy. It is similar with the body. Everyone has a certain aura, and you can try to fill up space with this energy instead of filling it up with the body. In my work, I like to transform this energy into an object. Bodies appear and vanish and are subject to a process of permanent change. They acquire biographies and memories. I'm interested in this process—not as narrative, but as energy. I'm less interested in the individual than in the collective. Because I'm trying to proceed to the origin—not of shape, but of attitude—I regard myself as a classical sculptor.

MS: *In another interview, you characterized the body as a vessel of information.*

JP: Yes, that's right. I recently visited the National Gallery in London to view a fantastic exhibition of works by Raphael, obviously a master draftsman and painter. However, it's not his technical



ability that overwhelms me but his genius to allow bodies to speak. Although my working mode is completely different, I feel close to him and to any artist capable of filling the body with information.

MS: You initially worked with iron and steel, later changing to paraffin wax, polyester, nylon, sound, and light, while words and text had influenced your life almost from the very beginning. In 1988 you created *Sleep No More*, which consists of three concave iron bricks on a metal plate with text.

JP: Yes, in the beginning I used forged steel and cast iron, adopting an industrial technique for my sculptures. I was dreaming about the moment when the mountains were formed, the moment when everything was liquid and hot and suddenly started to cool, solidify, and take shape. For me, there's a mythical element in the way fire transforms things into liquid. Something solid becomes liquid and then becomes an object again. *Sleep No More* is a very important work because it represents the first time I used text. An excerpt from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I've always thought that *Macbeth* provides the best definition of what a sculptor can be. For me, a sculptor uses physical material to express abstract ideas. The moment that Macbeth kills the king he destroys his own ability to sleep. The act is an expression of a precious paradox: Macbeth touches a body, which he kills, and at the same time he kills something untouchable. So I used this sentence in *Sleep No More*, casting it in iron to fix this fragile idea. It was a very important moment in my artistic career.

MS: And the concave bricks?

JP: They show something you can still find today in my work: the idea of creating something large out of small elements, much the same way that cells join together to form a complex body.

MS: As parts of an absent whole, the bricks seem to represent a metonymic concept.

JP: The work deals more with something general than something specific. It's about the problem of allying vertical and horizontal elements, which are abstract representations of man and world. In a very archaic way, the work has a sacred dimension, too. The flat plate with the text could represent the territory of a priest,



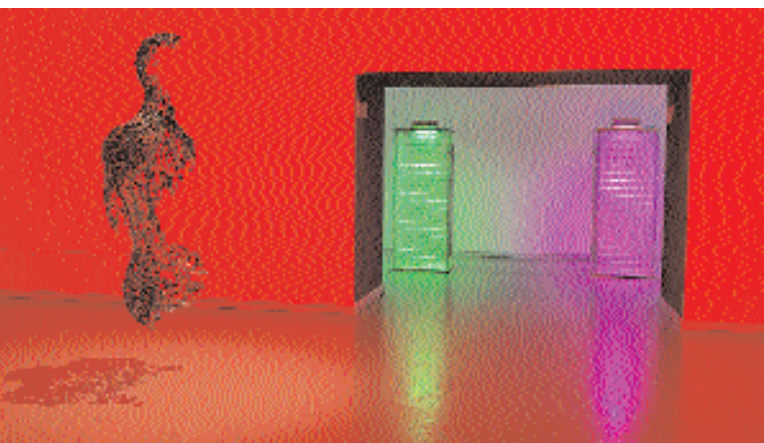
Opposite, top to bottom: *Désir*, 1991. Cast iron and light, 200 x 200 x 200 cm. *La Neige Rouge*, 1991. Cast iron and neon, 251 x 355 x 355 cm. *Poet's Chair*, 2002. Iron, glass, plastic, and light, dimensions variable. This page, above: *Blake in Gateshead*, 1996. Cast iron, steel, glass, and light, 5 x 500 x 180 cm. Permanent installation at the Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art, Gateshead, U.K. Below: View of "Jaume Plensa—B Open," Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art, 2001. 9 gongs, bronze, rope, wood, and wool, installation view.

the hollow spaces sacrificial sites. But perhaps you have other ideas about the work. It's similar to reading Shakespeare. Each reader understands the same text differently.

MS: Three years later, in 1991, you added light to the cast iron in works such as *Désir* and *La Neige Rouge*. Why?

JP: While working in the foundry with cast iron, I was fascinated by the light of the glowing red substance. When iron is molten it is pure light. It completely loses its weight. *La Neige Rouge* works with light the exact color of the molten iron when it comes out of the oven. For the first time, I also added sound to a work—the sound of electricity amplified by the conical shapes of the work itself. People were struck by the aggressiveness of the light and sound of this piece.





Top: *El corazón de las palabras*, 2000–01. Glass, mirror, stainless steel, and neon, 304 x 164 x 164 cm. Above: View of installation at the Kunsthalle Mannheim, with (foreground) *Tel Aviv*, 2004. Steel, 202 x 96 x 85 cm. Opposite: Two views of *Crown Fountain*, 2004. Glass, stainless steel, LED screens, light, and water, 3,300 sq. ft. Work installed at Millennium Park, Chicago.

MS: In all of these works, you use cones, cubes, cylinders, squares, and spheres, considered ideal aesthetic forms from Plato to the Minimalists. Are you participating in this tradition?

JP: In terms of geometry, these forms are the basis of everything. But my primary interest isn't in their aesthetic quality. I'm not a minimal artist. I want to provoke emotions in my works, and these forms help me to do so. Like the body, they are vessels of thought and feeling for me. In *Désir* and *Rêve*, you have a solid sphere of cast iron and in the center a small hole in which you can see red light. The relationship between the massive and the fragile is important: the massive element is protecting the fragile one. For me, the work depicts a narration of body and soul.

MS: Does this mean that your constructional forms tend to have a narrative quality beyond the narration of formal ideality?

JP: Definitely so. I recently completed a piece, called *Breathing*, for the BBC in London which, again, is conical but upside down;

it's transparent, made of glass, with light emitting from inside. The BBC commissioned it for a new building in Regent Street, where it is visible from all sides. It is accompanied by a text on silence. I reverse things. The people at the BBC live from their talking all the time, and I'm confronting them with a mode of existence praising silence. They understood this very well and were very excited about the idea. At night, a powerful beam of white light radiates out of the work into the sky.

MS: Like in your works for Gateshead, Stockholm, and Jerusalem?

JP: Yes, the BBC piece will also count among my vertical bridges connecting heaven and hell. Obviously, this is reminiscent of Blake.

MS: Why do you appreciate Blake so much?

JP: Blake became very important for me after I became familiar with his *Proverbs of Hell*. They are a brilliant combination of high culture and low, of tradition and progress, matter and spirit, body and soul. And I feel close to Blake because he, too, was born mid-century: Blake in the middle of the 18th century, while I was born in the middle of the 20th. Thus we both function as bridges between different times, forces, and energies. Besides, I'm obsessed with the idea that art itself is something in-between. It has to take up and assimilate a wide range of influences, experiences, and strengths and make a whole out of them.

MS: To what extent does language have a sculptural aspect?

JP: I think that in order to conceive words and letters as sculptures I had to be influenced by another poet, Rabelais. In one of his books, he tells a wonderful story: Gargantua is at sea with his men, and suddenly they hear strange sounds and voices in the air. It's very cold, and the words and sentences freeze and fall down as objects onto the ship. Later, it becomes warm again and they all melt away. The remaining drops look like diamonds, and the men ask Gargantua if he might sell them what remains of the voices. He responds by telling them that lawyers sell voices, but that he could only sell them silence, which is much more expensive. The physical aspect of language fascinates me. In my last gallery show in London, I had words like "day" and "night," "sweet" and "sour" engraved into two metal plates, which I connected to a scale. As the letters were incised into the metal, the weight of the plates changed and the scale's dishes went up or down accordingly. In this work, the weight is the absence of the word.

MS: You have previously worked with words and sentences cut into gongs and cymbals.

JP: Yes, the specific aspect of all these works is the material removed during the engraving process. It's like creating sculptures out of the negative, opening up quite a new space as an artist.

MS: You also present public artworks all over the world, including Barcelona, Breton Hall, Auch, Tenerife, Tokyo, Toronto, Potsdam, and Chicago. What distinguishes these works?

JP: Public space has its own laws and shouldn't be confused with a gallery or a museum. Public space is owned by a city's inhabitants, and the artist should keep this in mind. I have always refused to use public space as a site to install objects that interrupt people's customary movement. I try to produce something that invites them to come. In Chicago, where I was asked to take part in a competition, I wanted my work to represent an archive

of the city's inhabitants. For this project, *Crown Fountain*, I filmed the faces of thousands of Chicagoans, which I projected together with images of nature onto two large-format LCD screens on two opposing towers. In a way, the faces are like a mosaic representing the different cultures and ancestries of the city's people. The towers are located on a large plaza of black granite, cascades of water streaming down from them. Between the towers there's a pool that people can walk over—one of my dreams had been to invite people to walk on water. The towers radiate alternating, colored light. They are like transparent houses.

MS: *Crown Fountain* combines many of the elements and motifs that recur in your work, such as water, light, the body, duality and dialogue, nature and dreams.

JP: Yes. With *Crown Fountain*, I attempted to create a place of beauty where people could meet, talk, and meditate. I wanted it to be a modern version of the traditional fountain. When water streams out of the mouths, one is reminded of the gargoyle, which is an old deity of life and a popular motif in the history of fountains. The flowing of water, images, and light represents permanent change and transformation. I think that this is the first time people did not stand in front of a fountain watching the water, but instead stood in the middle of it, becoming a part of it. They experience the water like they experience the images. They are so close to them that they distinctly see the red, blue, and green dots that constitute the images of the 50-foot-high faces.

MS: *In a way you've created a monument to the average citizen.*

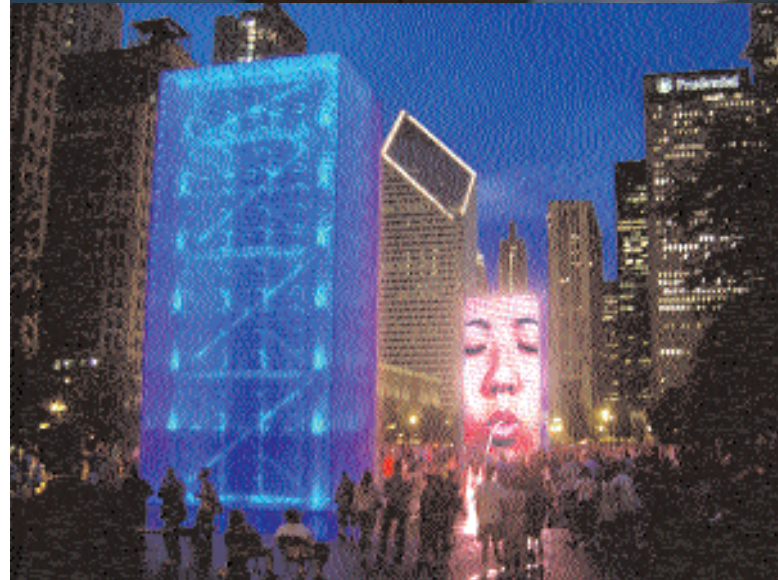
JP: I suppose you're right. It's very interesting to view the work when the plaza is full of people. When the face of an old man or a young boy appears on the screen, it's as if they could be someone's father or son. The faces are icons representing all of the citizens of Chicago. But, for me, the beauty of the work consists of the fact that in the midst of this vast emptiness, the two towers produce enormous tension. I think that people go there in order to feel this magnetism. It's a great pleasure for me to know that Chicagoans have really integrated *Crown Fountain* into their lives.

MS: *In 1993 you produced Wonderland I, which was followed by a second version in 1997 that included doors with words above them. The doors can indicate either an entrance or an exit and thus seem to represent a dualistic quality.*

JP: *Wonderland I* was done in cast iron and *Wonderland II* in cast paraffin wax. Only the latter has words above the doors: words designating food. When I did *Wonderland I*, I was in Great Britain working on a project and an exhibition for the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust. I was reading *Alice in Wonderland* at the time and thinking about someone who could shrink her body to pass through small doors. Reading Carroll's book is like reading a book on sculpture. I recall a conversation I once had with Anthony Caro, who told me: "Jaume, there are three major issues in sculpture—scale, scale, and scale!" "Yes," I replied, "but I disagree completely. For me, the most important issue is time."

MS: *Time?*

JP: Yes. Time appears in the doors of *Wonderland* in the way your image is reflected, as in a mirror. When you stand in front of a door, the most important thing is that you are thinking



about the other side, and what you are thinking depends on how old you are and what you have experienced in your life. *Wonderland I* is a very personal piece. When I was looking for information on doors, I came across a dictionary definition that said: "Door: the most important part of a house." I don't think that this is based on architecture, but because there's a decision connected to it: you have to decide whether and when to cross the threshold. That was the idea behind my work. When I produced *Wonderland I*, I was 38 years old. And because I decided to dedicate it to myself, I gave it 38 doors.

MS: *Why did you use a different material for Wonderland II?*

JP: Cast iron is so heavy, and the touch of it is so cold; it's like a gravestone, as if something is being sealed indefinitely. The paraffin wax for *Wonderland II* is the same substance people use to seal preserved food. The material is completely different, but the concept is exactly the same—the idea of sealing a place, which is the main purpose of a door—protection. The work was produced for Dallas and traveled to Caracas, Hannover, and Madrid. When it was shown in the Reina Sofia, a lot of people, mainly men, tried to open the doors, breaking a lot of handles. I was amused by their attempts, which seem so Mediterranean to me.

MS: *Where did the idea originate to combine the doors of Wonderland II with the names of food?*

JP: Several ideas flow together in this work. I spent two years in Dallas and Caracas taking photos of private kitchens. In my opinion, kitchens and hospitals belong to the most uniform places in the world. Food in itself is a kind of door. It's hard to talk about ideas if you are hungry. Even the most sophisticated philosophers understood that before you can think, you have to eat. Feuerbach once said that we are what we eat. Today, many people have the opportunity to eat food from all over the world; national borders no longer pose a restriction in this regard. Exchanging food is like exchanging ideas. I think that this is a marvelous experience.

MS: *Metonymically, the doors suggest houses, which in the form of cells, containers, and cabins play a large part in your work. There are houses made of polyester such as Bedroom (1995) and houses with texts such as Winter Kept Us Warm (1998), Scholars of War (1999), and Komm mit! Komm mit! (1999). Then there are the three houses made of brass, which are meant to be self-portraits (1997), as well as the four houses with body sounds, Love Sounds (1998). Are houses extensions of our personalities?*

JP: Certainly. But I want my houses to extend in another direction. After all, a house is a place to be. The idea of a home is more essential for me than the idea of a house. That's the most important point for me. For me, a home is not necessarily a building. It can be the wife you love, the book you are reading,

the music you like, or the nature you feel well with. It's a general concept. It's probably for this reason that people feel comfortable with my works regardless of where I show them—whether in Europe, the U.S., or Japan.

MS: *To what extent are your houses self-portraits?*

JP: Obviously not in a mimetic way, but they reveal something about me, my attitude toward humankind and the world. It's the idea of body and soul. A house is a body in the sense of it being a place to be. And when someone enters one of my houses, he or she furnishes them with a soul. The piece is not complete until someone enters it. Years ago I did an exhibition in Berlin with cells of polished brass.

MS: *Which one could open and enter as in Love Sounds?*

JP: Exactly. And it was wonderful to experience people disappearing into the cells, meaning inside myself. It felt like a love experience. In other, past cultures the idea was to disappear inside your lover. That was an ideal. Similarly, we have the idea to eat the person we love so he or she may become part of us. You mentioned *Love Sounds*, the cells made of alabaster with the sound of my blood circulating, which I showed at the Kestnergesellschaft in Hannover. They probably come close to an almost literal self-portrait with all these body sounds. It was great to watch people disappearing inside of them. I continue to work in this direction. In Tokyo, I did a public installation in an amusement district.

MS: *The Seven Deities of Good Fortune?*

JP: Right. In Shibuya. I transformed myself into benches, into a place on which to sit, which is another form of a place to be. And now, when the work is illuminated at night, you see that it has become a favorite place for lovers to meet. For me, it's only then that a public artwork has been successfully completed—when it has been embraced by the population and becomes part of their daily lives.

MS: *You mentioned that you work as an artist for the opera. Do you feel that there is an affinity between the stage and sculpture?*

JP: Yes, I think that working for the opera is a natural extension of my work in space. I described how beautiful it is for me to see my work alive, with people using it. This is a basic condition on



GUNTER LEPKOWSKI

stage. What you create for the stage is used by other people. What attracts me to the stage, too, is that the work at an opera is an amazing combination of different energies and knowledge. You have the author, the director, the composer, the singers and dancers, the conductor. I love the opera: it was born from the idea of creating a “total art,” an idea that still fascinates me. But the best thing about opera is its ephemerality. It exists only for the transitory moments of its representations. It is born and it disappears. Thus it’s like a parable of life. I like the idea of the permanence of my works in public spaces, but I also like this concept of ephemerality.

MS: *One of your last contributions to the stage, The Children of Freud, was shown as an artwork at the Dakar Biennial before it was used for a theater production in Rome.*

JP: Yes, but this was an exception. A director saw it and wanted to use it. I gave my permission, but I had nothing to do with the production. I planned and created *The Children of Freud* for the Dakar Biennial. It was meant to transport my culture to Africa. I did an installation of 23 white faces and hands, casts of my friends made of white marble dust, with water falling from their eyes and their hands.

MS: *Why did you choose the title?*

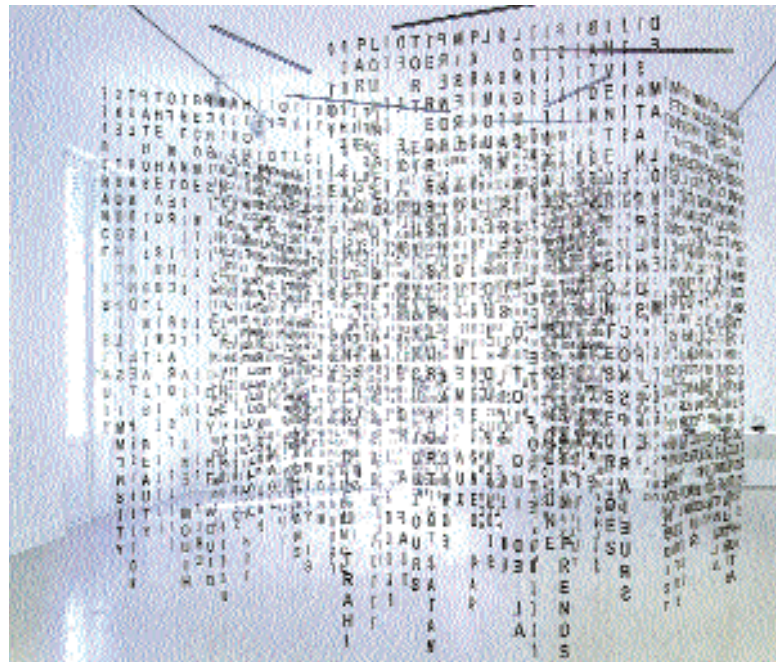
JP: Because I hate Freud. I think he is responsible for a lot of misunderstandings in our culture, especially with regard to emotions. I think plenty of generations are Freud’s children in this respect. In spite of the title, when I had finished the work I was thinking more about Dante than about Freud. It reminds me of the *Inferno*, where people are in the water suffering in squalor. But I feel the piece is also connected to another idea that I have always explored in my work: as human beings and as artists we are like islands— isolated, probably in the same ocean, but with a very specific geography. *The Children of Freud* shows islands floating in the darkness with very little light, much like *Wispern*, which I showed in Hannover and Madrid. When you saw *Wispern* for the first time, it had only seven cymbals. Now it has been extended to include 41. I’m currently preparing an exhibition for the new museum in Malaga, where the installation will have 44 elements. The work is growing to fit each space. I hope that one day it will encompass 73 elements, exactly the number of Blake’s *Proverbs of Hell*, which are engraved in the cymbals.

MS: *What does art mean in your life?*

JP: For me, art is nothing more than a body sound. Our bodies produce vibrations, and I view art as one of these vibrations. It belongs to me: it’s a part of me. Without art, I’m not imaginable. I never took care to become a good artist, but I always took care to become a good person. I don’t care about art as a problem of shapes. Art is a consequence. It’s the breath of my experience. It helps people understand life. It helps people to grow up. But I’m not good at explaining what art is or should be. If I were able to do so, I probably could not continue to be an artist any longer.

MS: *In a famous work by Bruce Nauman, we learn that the artist is a luminous fountain. Do you understand yourself in that way?*

JP: Let me put it this way: every definition of an artist with regard to art and his or her role as an artist is right, subjectively right.



Opposite: *Love Sounds I, II, III, IV, V*, 1998. Alabaster, stainless steel, synthetic leather, iron, light, and sound, 5 elements, 212 x 120 x 115–228 cm.

This page: *Silent Rain*, 2004. Iron, installation view.

Every single artist has his or her individual experience of art. Henri Bergson defined time as a combination of individual time. I think it’s quite similar with art. In the end, combining all of the different experiences and definitions would probably sum up what art is and what an artist is. There is no such thing as just one single definition.

MS: *The Japanese artist Sugimoto once said that anyone could say anything they liked about his work and no one would be wrong. Do you share his opinion with respect to your own work?*

JP: You know, that’s something I don’t think about and I don’t even care about. You see, no one asked me to be an artist, and no one asked me to make art. I wanted to be an artist, and I wanted to create art. So I’m the only one responsible. I’m not really sure if I’m interested in hearing opinions about my art—if it’s good or bad, right or wrong. On the contrary, what I’m interested in are the emotions it provokes. Yesterday I was in a restaurant here in Goslar [Germany], and a little girl, the daughter of the proprietor, was playing near my table. She’s a sweet little darling, and she looked at me with big questioning eyes, wondering who I was. I took a stone from my bag—I love stones and carry some with me all the time—and gave it to her, telling her it was from Spain. She was so fascinated by this ordinary little stone, you can’t imagine. She showed it to all the people in the restaurant. Something extraordinary had enriched her life. The stone was nothing, but it was everything to her. A miracle. That’s what art is for me.

Michael Stoeber is a writer living in Germany.