

# BIG IDEAS

WE, 2008

Jaume Plensa (Barcelona, Spain)

**WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE?** The Spanish sculptor Jaume Plensa who was born in 1955 in Barcelona, Spain created this sculpture. He had his first one-person exhibition in 1980 at age 25. Since then he has continuously created new artwork. His studio remains in Barcelona, but he has also lived and worked in Berlin, Brussels, England and Paris, France, where he maintains a second home.

Unlike some sculptors who work in one main material, Plensa uses a variety of materials – steel, iron, bronze and brass, plastic and polyester. He has also created work using water and fire, light and sound.



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Plensa says; “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.”

Sculptures by Plensa can be found in museums and in prominent public places in many cities. Public art is an important aspect of Plensa’s work: “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.”

**HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE?** The various individual letters of the seven major alphabets were die cut and then the individual steel letters were welded together to create the human form. The selection of each letter was somewhat random with no words spelled out by the use of the letters. The letters form a decorative aesthetic element, but also suggest meanings expressed in the work.



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**WE, 2008** WEIGHS 2,700 KG (5,950 LB.) AND WAS TRANSPORTED IN 5 SEGMENTS AND ASSEMBLED ON-SITE. THE DIMENSION OF THE PIECE IS 360 CM (11.8 FT) X 340 CM (11.2 FT) X 500 CM (16.4 FT).



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**WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS WORK?**

Words, in the form of letters, literary quotes, names or pieces of text play an important role in much of Plensa's work. He is known for his monumental figurative sculptures that incorporate letters to form the human body. In an earlier work titled *Nomad*, only English letters were used to create the human form.

With no cultural-based physical qualities or clothing, the larger-than life human form is made up of characters from eight major alphabets, Latin, Greek, Russian Cyrillic, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, Arabic and Chinese. In *WE, 2008*, Plensa celebrates the linguistic diversity of the human family by putting multiple alphabets together on a single human form. The form is "everyman & woman" who all share the experience of language. Characters make up the outline of the androgynous body—neither a female nor a male is clearly discernible.



The negative spaces within, and between the letters give the sculpture a lace-like or filigree quality. Plensa says: “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. In my works, words and letters are lent weight and volume.” In this piece the letters float and the open space is the empty interior of the sculpture – an interior that can be entered.

The sculpture *We*, 2008 has a lace like quality that gives it a sense of it floating or being weightless. The letters all have open spaces and have been soldered together creating a filigree-like surface. Filigree is a term generally used for delicate, lacelike ornamental openwork often composed of intertwined wire threads of gold or silver, widely used in jewellery. The art consists of curling, twisting, or plaiting fine, pliable metal threads and soldering them at their points of contact with each other and, if there is one, with the metal groundwork. The process dates back to the ancient Greeks and the use of filigree was used in Roman times.

In the Islamic culture there is a great significance placed on text therefore much of the art uses calligraphy as the primary decorative element, also because there is a prohibition against representing people or living images in Islamic art.

Look up the diverse alphabets of the world on the following website: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/alternative.htm>

**HOW DOES THIS WORK CONNECT TO THIS ARTIST'S OTHER WORK?** The first time Plensa used text was in a work titled *Sleep No More* where Plensa used 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



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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.”

In another Plensa piece *Three Graces* made in 2005, excerpts from a letter of protest about prison conditions in England penned by Oscar Wilde were painted along the bodies of three large kneeling figures cast in translucent polyester resin, lit from within. The body forms are hung vertically high up on the gallery.

In a work titled *Silent Voices* Plensa inscribed lists on the figures – lists of parts of the body, the names of craters. “I have always been working with words. My main theory is that they are constantly around us. We use words as an extension of our bodies, to expand our thoughts and ideas to the external world. So the body is a very noisy organism. The title *Silent Voices* comes from the idea that what we feel is silent is actually not. Our bodies are constantly creating noise—like a perpetual voice in conversation. But it creates this voice in a silent attitude.”



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TO LEARN MORE:

<http://www.jaumeplensa.com> or

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaume\\_Plensa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaume_Plensa)

## Glossary

**ALPHABET**—any system of characters with which a language is written or a system for representing the sounds of a language through marks or forms. The alphabet used to represent English developed in the ancient Near East and was transmitted from the northwest Semites to the Greeks. It is an alphabet in which each symbol represents one sound unit in the spoken language, and from which many different alphabetical scripts developed.

**ANDROGYNOUS**—Being neither distinguishably masculine nor feminine, as in dress, appearance, or behaviour. Die cut - Die cutting started as a process for cutting shapes in leather for the shoe industry. It has evolved to be able to machine cut laminates and metals. In cutting metal shapes the process is known as clicking.

**LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY**—The range of languages spoken in one place, city, country or around the world. Linguistic diversity is the natural state of society in most places where more than 50% of the population is bilingual.

**NEGATIVE SPACES**—In sculpture the negative or open spaces define the form as much as the positive areas. The negative space is the space around and between the solid areas. The use of negative space is a key element of artistic composition.

**WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN VANCOUVER?** This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works and film. The objective is to use great art as a catalyst to transformative learning and social action.

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

**TO LEARN MORE** you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at [www.vancouverbiennale.com](http://www.vancouverbiennale.com)

**IMAGE CREDITS:**

- 1 *WE, 2008*; Dan Fairchild
- 2 Sculptor
- 3 *WE, 2008* (detail); Dan Fairchild
- 4 *Silent Voices*; Moriyoshi Sugaya
- 5 *Dream*; Mark Payne
- 6 *Crown Fountain*; Antonio Vernon
- 7 *The Three Graces IV*; Moriyoshi Sugaya

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