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# Public Art Review

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## BIG VISION

JR talks about boundaries, limits, seeing  
people, and being bold

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ARTISTS & FABRICATORS:

# SO HAPPY TOGETHER



# Most public art projects are the result of collaboration between artist and fabricator. What makes this relationship tick?

by Elizabeth Keithline



**ARTISTS CURIOUS ABOUT WORKING** in the public realm are sometimes told that public artists work in teams, but if one hasn't been exposed to this way of working, it's hard to understand what that really means.

How do artists and fabricators decide to work together? What makes for a fruitful partnership? What are some of the challenges of this kind of relationship?

We decided to find out by talking with artist/fabricator teams.

## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

### JAUME PLENSA/HEAVY INDUSTRIES

In 2012, artist Jaume Plensa worked with the Canadian fabricator Heavy Industries to produce *Wonderland*, a 39-foot-tall, award-winning sculpture of a young girl's head, located in the plaza of the Encana Corporation in Calgary.

Plensa's work with Heavy Industries started in spring of 2010 with his expression of interest in the project. "When you start with a particular shop, it takes a certain period of time for them to learn about you and your work," says Plensa. "There can be discussions or fights. Each of us is trying to catch the true capacity of the other. It sometimes seems like a waste of time, but that's not the case at all. The president of Heavy was especially kind. It's pretty important that the company who has to help you is also excited. Those guys were really a pleasure in that direction."

Plensa first had Heavy build a full-scale model of the young girl's ear. The model was designed on computer and then fabricated. "The digital model is the brains and the hands of the project," explains Encana's Ken Heinbecker. During this phase, Plensa and his preferred welder would visit to check on the work (and attend hockey games), and Heavy would also check in from time to time with Plensa's team in Barcelona. They were getting to know each other.

Public commissions have a set budget and it's unusual for that number to change. Private developers potentially have more play to make additions to the budget and to make changes and improvements to a project. This is a great problem to have, but changes require communication and everyone has to be kept in the loop. A good fabricator willingly attends to these details and manages communication carefully.

When you are working on a Plensa, you are aware that you are producing a very high-visibility project. It has to be right. Heavy Industries was happy to oblige.

LEFT: Jaume Plensa's *Wonderland* (2012) in Calgary, Alberta. Commissioned by Encana Corporation and fabricated by Heavy Industries.



Photo courtesy HY Architecture. PREVIOUS PAGE: Photo © Jaume Plensa, courtesy Gallery Lelong, New York.



### ONE-OF-A-KIND TECHNICAL FIREWORKS ERIK CARLSON/PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT

Erik Carlson, a public artist, and Mohammad Asgari, a tech designer and fabricator at Parallel Development, recently completed *Circulate*, a public art project for the Lentz Public Health Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

The two met as co-subcontractors on a larger project: Carlson did the sound component for *Aviary*, an installation that Parallel built for The Village at the Dubai Mall. When Carlson won the commission in Nashville, he knew he wanted to work with Parallel Development again.

That's because Carlson uses technology as a medium. If a foundry closes, you can always find another one; but Parallel's digital works are usually one of a kind, so they aren't as easy to replace.

"We are using the same things as industry," says Asgari. "The main difference is that we're probably only going to make something one time. We can't use that iterative process. There are always new issues that arise that aren't typical. The client's expectation is that it will work. But if we haven't done it before, that may be unrealistic." This environment suits Asgari, who began his working life as an electrical engineer and joined Parallel to work on cutting-edge projects.

Another challenge is that no matter how good an artist's power of visualization, installation day is often the first time to see the piece in its final form. Carlson, a musician, is familiar with both collaboration and risk.

Together, the two collaborators have two of the most important elements of a good public art partnership: the temperament and the tolerance required for the work.

Asgari's definition of the perfect artist client is "a friend who is doing really interesting things." How many in the corporate world can say the same?



OPPOSITE: *Aviary*, installed at The Village at the Dubai Mall, was created by collaborators HY Architecture (design/lead artist), Erik Carlson (audio/artist), and Parallel Development (engineer). TOP: *Circulate* at Nashville Tennessee's Lentz Public Health Center was created by Erik Carlson (artist) and Parallel Development (tech consultant and engineer). BOTTOM: Carlson, a musician, relies on Parallel Development for technological expertise in projects like *Circulate*.



## AN EYE ON THE LONG TERM

### LAURA HADDAD AND TOM DRUGAN/SILO WORKSHOP

Amorette Lana and Conor Hollis are the principals of Silo Workshop. In addition to working as fabricators, they are also conservators and working artists.

Laura Haddad and Tom Drugan began working with Silo when they won a public art commission for the Denver Animal Shelter. The City of Denver recommended three fabricators. The artists used a larger firm, Demiurge, for the exterior portion of the commission, but they decided to go with Silo for an interactive, oversized dog collar that was being installed in the lobby.

It's important that Lana and Hollis understand the artists' aesthetic, but, thinking like conservators, they also tend to see durability and conservation issues up front. As a result, they bring important knowledge to the design phase on both an aesthetic level as artists and a practical level as conservators.

Laura Haddad told this story about Silo: They were once on a New England site at 5:00 PM on the Friday of Easter weekend. Drilling into walls that had a lot more rebar than had been anticipated, they realized they needed a special drill bit, but stores selling such an item were closed. Quickly harnessing the time difference between the East Coast and Seattle (where they are based), they special-ordered the bit, had it delivered overnight, and were back drilling by Saturday morning.

This is the kind of commitment that artists should look for when thinking about whom to hire. There will never be anyone who cares about your work quite as much as you do, but there are a few companies out there that will care almost as much. Silo showed their stripes on that Easter weekend far from home.



TOP: Silo Workshop installing Laura Haddad's *Semaphore* (2014) in Rhode Island. BOTTOM and OPPOSITE: More views of *Semaphore* after installation was completed.





Photo by Mark La Rosa.

### FROM THE CRADLE TO THE PUBLIC MIKYOUNG KIM/AMUNEAL

Mikyoung Kim, principal of Mikyoung Kim Design, has created many public art installations. Kim is a landscape architect and public artist who often includes metal sculptural components in her work.

Kim has worked with Amuneal of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for 12 years. Although the fabricators work with many materials, “custom metalwork is a core element of nearly everything that we build,” according to Amuneal’s website.

Kim’s sculptures often feature many precisely drilled perforations that require strict attention to detail to produce a fine, lacy look. At the same time, the pieces naturally demand the strength and durability of an exterior public art commission: The work must withstand all that the public can throw at it. Kim feels that Amuneal understands both ends of this spectrum.

Amuneal also ships the work, which Kim likens to a baby going home from the hospital. If it leaves the mother’s arms during this time, something might happen. As Kim says, “Amuneal makes sure that the baby arrives safely.” Amuneal knows what has gone into the piece in production and what it requires as it travels.

She also says that when she visits Amuneal’s factory, owner Adam Kamens often takes her through the shop so that she can see everything they’re working on. She likes the feeling of being connected to the other contemporary projects in the shop.





OPPOSITE: Mikyoung Kim's *Exhale* (2013) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was created in collaboration with Amuneal. LEFT: The grand opening party of *Exhale*. BELOW: Mikyoung Kim also worked with Amuneal to create *The Pendulum Project* (2012), a resin wall at Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C.





Photo by Donald Lipski, courtesy Galerie Lelong.

**FRIENDSHIP COMES FIRST**  
**DONALD LIPSKI/JOHN GRANT**

A different team structure, and probably one of the sweetest relationships examined here, is the one between public artist Donald Lipski and project manager John Grant.

Imagine two guys in bathrobes sipping coffee while talking on the phone on a Sunday morning, and you may begin to envision Lipski and Grant's relationship. Though Grant is a project manager, not a fabricator, this relationship is worth looking at if for no other reason than it is so effective. These two have built 25 projects together over the course of their 15-year partnership and currently have another 6 in the works.

The two met when Grant was managing the City of Denver's public art program. Lipski applied for a commission and didn't get selected, but a private donor ended up buying the piece. Grant and his wife took Lipski ice skating, and Lipski reportedly turned to Grant and said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could work together?"

Grant's experience as a public art administrator led him to conclude that fabricators often work beyond their comfort level. They try to do it all, which isn't necessarily the most efficient path for their artist clients. So he built a roster of specialty fabricators upon whom he can call, based on the needs of the job.

Lipski is famous for never proposing the same piece twice, so Grant's stable is a good fit for him. What he mainly needs is an administrator who can relieve the pressures of applications, contracts, and schedules. If he dreams up an idea, he knows there will be someone able to turn it into reality.

Grant says that in the very beginning of their work life, they sat down and wrote a half-page document which said that their friendship was more important than their work and that they would stop working together if work ever got in the way of it. Fifteen years later—no problems.



ABOVE: John Grant with Donald Lipski's *Candy Box* (2013) in Lincoln, Nebraska.  
OPPOSITE: Grant installs Lipski's *Time Piece* (2012) in El Monte, California.

Photo by Donald Lipski, courtesy Galerie Lelong.

**ELIZABETH KEITHLINE** is an artist, curator, and owner of *Wheel Arts Administration*, whose clients include the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts' Percent for Art Program, the Governors Island Art Fair in New York, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the Barr Foundation, the Charles River Conservancy, and private public-artist clients.