Mark Jenkins: Startling, Lifelike Street Art

12.22.2010 by Katie Fanuko



If you've walked down the streets of Washington, DC in the past couple of years and done a double take when seeing a man with his head stuck through a concrete wall or a plastic baby pulling down a street sign, then you've probably witnessed the work of installation artist **Mark Jenkins**.

Since 2003, the DC-based artist has altered urban spaces throughout the world by constructing off-kilter creations with little more than packing tape and plastic wrap. In addition to showing his work in galleries like **Stricola Contemporary Art** in New York and the **SESC** in Sao Paulo, Jenkins also likes to bring site-specific pieces to the streets so that the average pedestrian can interact with his art as well.

"I figure that if you do something in a public space, you might as well do something where there are people walking around," Jenkins says.

Seven years ago, Jenkins was hiking through the Andes with a former girlfriend. The couple planned to relocate to Brazil to teach English, but she ended up moving back to the USA, and he fell in with a group of street-installation artists. Their influence motivated Jenkins to hone his tape-casting skills.

"When I was in Brazil, I would put plastic wrap down first and then tape over it, and you can capture a lot more detail," he says. "So I think, with this technique, it was what really enabled me to get in there and really get every detail, whether it was horses or human forms or just any object that you're casting."

Though his incredibly life-like installations look as though they took hours to painstakingly craft, Jenkins can usually set up his pieces in high-traffic areas in less than five minutes. He feels that a quick "drop" allows people to have a more natural reaction to his work because the viewer can perceive his installations in a completely different context without his presence.

> *“I don’t want it to be a project that is tethered to me. I want people to have the experience of art without the artist being around.”*

Although Jenkins often tries to disassociate himself from his work as quickly as possible once he’s gone public with it, he usually sticks around for a few minutes to take a couple of pictures from across the street. However, he doesn’t stay long. “I don’t usually like to be there watching for some reason,” he says.

“It doesn’t feel right to be sitting there gawking when people are looking at the art, because I want their experience to be genuine. And if I’m standing across the street, it just doesn’t feel right to me.”

Regardless, he’s witnessed some tense reactions to his work over the years. Back in 2006, Jenkins set up an installation that resembled a panhandler sitting on the ground, wearing jeans and a hoodie with the hood lowered over his head. Jenkins snapped a quick photo of a little girl sneaking up to the installation to check if it was real while her father abruptly stepped in to usher her away.

But that was nothing compared to what happened next: “One guy came up and looked at it, and he kicked him to see if he was real instead of reaching down to

touch him," Jenkins says. "It's kind of weird because everyone else walking around didn't realize that it's not real; [they] just [saw] some guy kicking a beggar."

And then there was the situation in Malmö, Sweden. In April of 2008, Jenkins traveled to Sweden and decided to place a replica of a fully clothed body floating under a bridge with multicolored balloons attached to the torso. A passerby thought that it was a real body and called the police. Just as Jenkins and his friend were leaving the area, they saw a squad of emergency vehicles descending on the scene. "While we were driving away, three fire trucks and all of these ambulances were coming," Jenkins says.

> *"The people on the street kind of become part of what is happening, the art just turns into a catalyst for what is happening, and people just become actors, basically."*

The police are another reason that Jenkins tries to be as covert as possible with his work. "When you're doing a street job, you don't want a cop or some of these people in the city," he says. "In DC, they have a couple of companies that are contracted by the government to watch out for what's going on in the street. You don't want to get out there and have that call made and have your project stopped because you are dilly dallying around talking to some guy on the street." Although

he hasn't had too many run-ins with the law in the USA, the same can't be said for when he's gone abroad.

While in Palestine, he was working on a project that was facilitated by famed British street artist **Banksy**. Jenkins created a piece with a pair of legs haphazardly sticking out of a huge black garbage bag. As he took a photo of it, a Palestinian student mistook him for being a member of the Israeli media, and within a couple of minutes, others took notice of the situation and got the local police involved.

"I had a small mob screaming at me, and they were kind of backing me into a corner, so I was pretty happy to have the cops show up," Jenkins says. "The cops took us into the station and made us erase our pictures. But in the end, we had coffee with them, and they let us take pictures with them and all of the sculptures. It's intense when the authorities get called, but at the end of the day, if anyone gets riled up, they simmer down pretty quick."

Jenkins doesn't plan to let these setbacks keep him from traveling abroad. In fact, he spent a good portion of the fall of 2009 in Russia at the invitation of an artist-residency group called **CCP**. "A lot of art teachers have started contacting me and asking [me] to teach students how to do this," he says. "So this is one of those ones where they will have between 30 and 50 students all being part of this project."

Invitations like this have become so commonplace that Jenkins actually left his nine-to-five job in order to bring his art to the masses on a full-time basis. “With the human sculptures, it’s about creating a stage,” he says. “The people on the street kind of become part of what is happening, the art just turns into a catalyst for what is happening, and people just become actors, basically.”

Banksy, CCP, Mark Jenkins, SESC, Stricola Contemporary Art



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