

MARK JENKINS: "I'M A LITTLE AFRAID OF MY SCULPTURES"

ART HANNA TSUPKO 07/03/2023 11 MIN

American artist Mark Jenkins does not call his audience spectators, preferring the term «actors». It is they who should interact with his

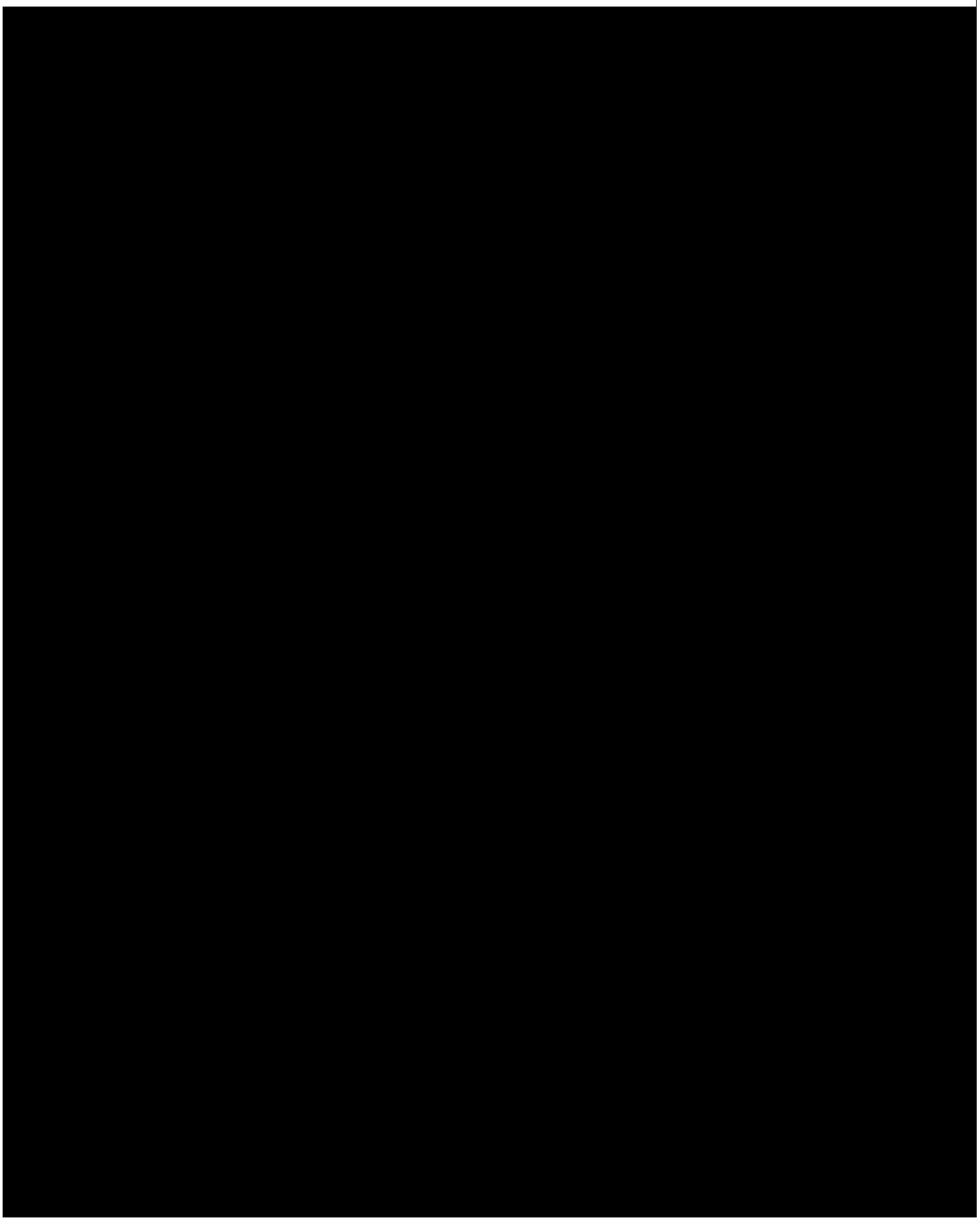
He created his first sculpture in 2003, installing it in a landfill in Rio de Janeiro to draw attention to children living on the streets. At the time, Jenkins called his work a social experience rather than art. This is a definition he still avoids to this day, preferring street work to exhibitions in galleries or museums and actively collaborating with environmental organizations and foundations for suicide prevention. And one of his dreams is to put many of his sculptures on the water at the foot of Niagara Falls to see the reaction of tourists.

In an interview with DTF Magazine, Mark told us what it's like to become an artist after 30 years, about the work he chose for Module of Temporality, about his conversations with the police and fire brigades, and whether he's afraid of his own sculptures.

— What made you interested in participating in MOT?

— The team of the Paris gallery with which I cooperate told me about Module of Temporality. I liked the project because culture is important, and it's also cool that MOT is a mix of Ukrainian and foreign artists. And in general I thought that the MOT had a great potential to draw attention and be a driver of change.

For the project I chose an already created work that seems simple at first glance: two guys playing “rock — paper — scissors”. But in fact, it is also a metaphor for the fact that people very often say one thing, but plan or act differently. Let's take China, for example, whose government now says that they don't support russia, but I think they're playing a double game. And it all looks pretty innocent, but there's really dark stuff hiding behind the facade. In general, this is inherent in my works, although I don't seek to impose my interpretation, and everyone can interpret my work in their own way.




EXIT

Скульптура «Камінь, Папір, Сокира», представлена на виставці в МОТ у Києві





— Your work on display at MOT is one of those that gets the most attention from visitors — they want to touch it, they take pictures with it. This is, however, a typical reaction to sculptures. What do you think the secret is?

— Not long ago I was at the Frieze art fair in Los Angeles. I was just walking around among the other visitors.

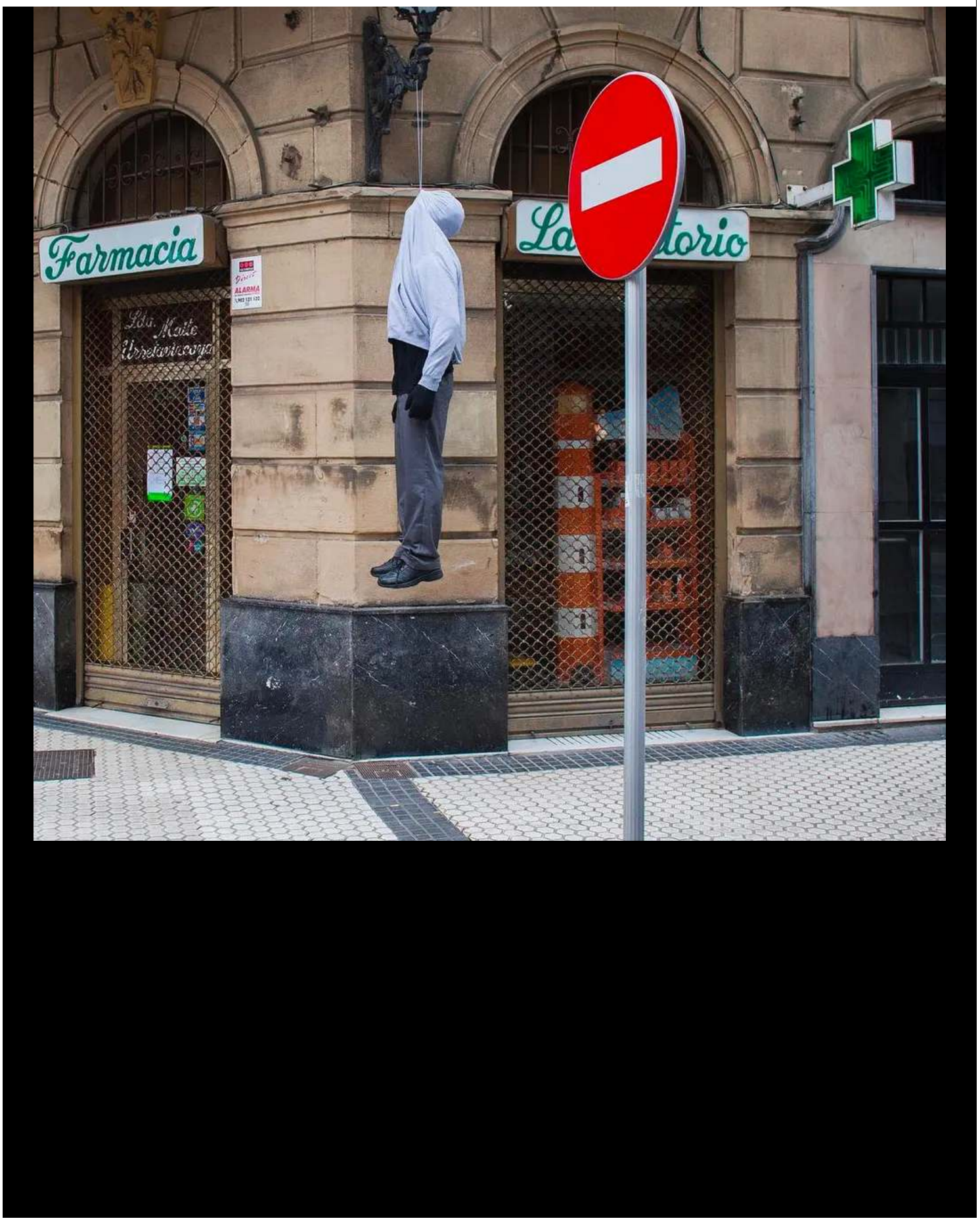
My works immediately evoke a reaction, people immediately try to make sense of what they see, they try to find out how real it is and whether these sculptures are a threat.

Perhaps it's just a person sleeping on the street or in a gallery. It provokes a certain natural reaction in people. I think it's a kind of magic. It's not possible to experience

— Do you originally envision your works as interactive objects, so that people will actively interact with them and even call the police?

— My first sculptures were made out of clear packaging tape. I was living in Brazil at the time. So I took them outside to take some photos. I realized that people were very interested in my creations, which made the photos more interesting and also turned my project into a kind of social experiment. Then I started working in the genre of hyperrealism, and the reactions became more chaotic and even led to calls to the police. Sometimes the police come up with guns to my sculptures, which cannot react, and this only exacerbates the situation. But that's part of the process.

Sometimes I just want to place a figure somewhere in the city, because it's quite poetic. But the reaction will always be different, because the understanding of normal and abnormal behavior is different in every society. Some will perceive my figures as something hostile, as a threat, because in their opinion it might be someone who shouldn't be there, someone with mental illness and the like. And that's the question — what is normal behavior in the city, what is acceptable and what is not? And is there any pressure from the community about that.


Farmacia
ALARMA



— When I make a project for the street, I understand that people will interact with it as much as possible. A sculpture can be broken or stolen. Anything is possible. I don't mind even if someone touches my sculptures in a gallery or museum. What I don't like, even when my works are placed outside, is when someone puts a cap or sunglasses or something else on them. Of course that doesn't happen in galleries, unless someone gives my sculpture a glass of wine. But I realize that it's weird to complain, and it's rather normal in the case of my works.

— Mankind has been creating sculptures since ancient times. Where do you think this desire to create lifeless copies of ourselves comes from?

— Yes, this is a very ancient practice. The Greeks and Romans created naked bodies of people out of marble. They had a real passion for it. I don't know if it's some form of narcissism, which is inherent in humanity in general, or an attempt to understand the idea of man. But it started with a kind of desire for aesthetics. Because there was a reason they chose marble as a material.

It's a little more prosaic if we're talking about me — I distort reality.

I also use my own body to create sculptures, gaining a kind of experience of the outer body. But it's not about narcissism, because I don't feel that these figures are me. It's something more, something scarier. And I'm even a little afraid of my sculptures.

— Where do you prefer to present your works — in a gallery or on the street?

It's comparable to a fish in an aquarium and a fish in open water. And galleries will do their best to let visitors know that these are not real people. And there's also the same light as in an aquarium.







— It depends on the location where the work will be located. For example, sometimes the authorities of a city ask me to create a project. And for some reason almost all of them think that in their city nothing special will happen with my work and that it won't cause any unexpected reaction from people. But even when my sculptures looked surreal there were people who panicked, called the police, etc. Some people were angry, saying, “We thought there was a crime here, but the police came for nothing and now have to remove your works instead of doing their job”.

I once did a project at the request of the mayor of Bordeaux, who gave me permission to place the sculpture wherever I wanted. I placed it on the top tier of the fountain, as if the person had plunged headlong into it, and passersby on the street could only see its feet. Soon the fire brigade arrived, and I showed them a document I had received from the city council that said I had the right to do anything to anyone in the city. The fire brigade thought I was making fun of them and reported the situation to their supervisor, who called the mayor. The mayor laughed for a long time, and all in all it's a pretty funny and interesting situation, but I don't think all taxpayers will agree with that. It's also a kind of experiment that allows you to explore how this or that city functions.

But in general as an artist I just do something that I like, without thinking ahead about whether people will be angry with me or not. What I do is just fun.



— A lot of material about you says that you create your sculptures to take people away from their phone screens. Is that really one of your

— I created my first sculptures for photographs. And then I saw the effect it could have on people. But I think this is about sculpture as an art form in general. Now we are too much into two-dimensional things, like our phone screens. And even the most beautiful paintings are flat. And sculpture is three-dimensional and pushes you to think differently.

I find our attachment to telephones and flat experiences a bit frightening. It's not far from believing that the Earth is really flat.

One of my friends, a street artist, once joked that sometimes he thought that only my sculptures and a really dead person could get the attention of people on the street. However, even that can't make some people take their eyes off the screens.





— I don't set myself the task of changing the world or making people better. If you take, for example, Banksy, he works with messages, communicates with the audience, gives them some ideas, jokes with them, and also shows the dark side of humanity. That's not how I work. It's more like contemplating nature: mountains or a waterfall, for example. They are incredibly beautiful, but they don't have the goal of making people happier. They just exist. The universe does not speak to us, but at the same time it is a beautiful sight worthy of admiration.

Besides, it has become very difficult to change anyone's mind. If I wanted to prove something to Donald Trump's fans, I just couldn't do it, they would ignore me. But some artists can do it. Like Banksy. As for myself, I'm not sure I have that desire. I prefer an individual approach. For example, I enjoyed collaborating with environmental organizations and made sculptures for a foundation whose work focuses on suicide prevention. It's a great project. Or MOT, for example, I see that it has a purpose. Usually it goes like this: they tell me that my works would be good for some project. And if it's really something worthwhile, I easily agree to participate.







— Your career as an artist began when you were over 30 years old, which is rather an exception. Were these changes planned? And what was the impetus to take up art?

— I didn't think I was going to be an artist. I did music for a while, playing in different bands. I got a degree in geology, but my sister, by the way, studied art. But I grew up with the idea that an artist is someone who can draw a face or, for example, a motorcycle that will really look like a face or a motorcycle. I couldn't do that, so I thought I had no talent for art.

works of the Spanish artist Juan Muñoz, who created a variety of installations both inside and outside the gallery. It was a new experience that I enjoyed. But right before the exhibition, he died suddenly. And for some reason it stuck in my mind.

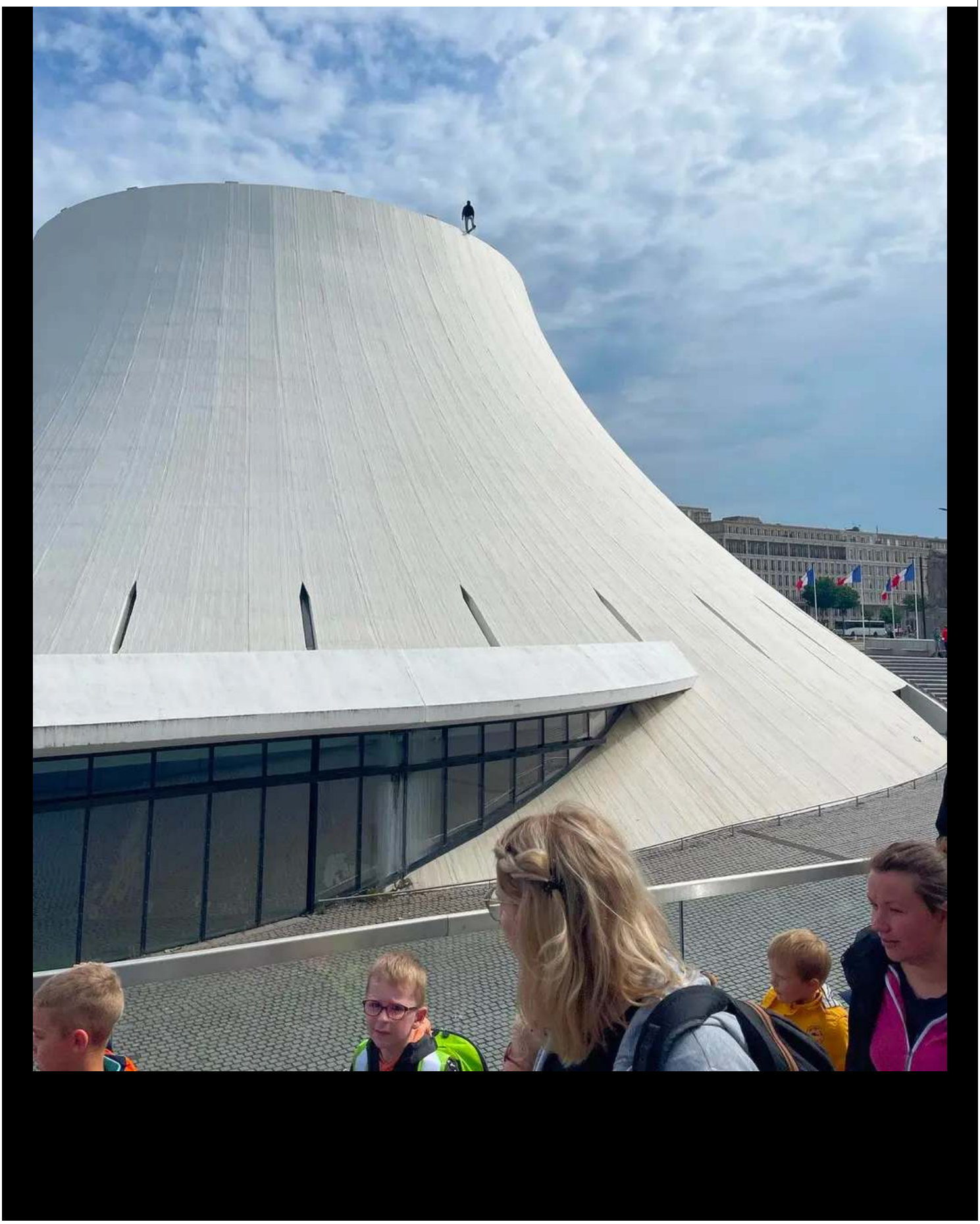
Two years later, when I moved to Brazil, where I taught English, I began my experiments with packaging tape. And I realized that I could make sculptures using my body — I would wrap it in tape, and then take these «dry-casts» off and put all the parts of the figure together. I wanted to expand the practice of that artist and place my works not just near some building, but on the street. At that time I didn't think of myself as an artist, but rather that I was engaged in a kind of social experiment. And I didn't think I could enter the art world without proper education.



Марк Дженкінс

I also never made a secret out of how exactly I created my sculptures, and about two years after creating the first ones, I started giving master classes because people were always asking me how I made it.







— How did you end up in Brazil?

around me: the nature, the culture, the things that were new to me. Perhaps this became a kind of incentive to make art, because Brazil is rich in all kinds of street art, and artists sell their work right on the street. Maybe I made my sculptures partly because I wanted to be part of the local environment and not just a tourist. However, when locals came up to me and asked if I was an artist, I categorically denied it.



— What is the most surprising thing you've learned about people through your sculptures?

— I once collaborated with an artist from Sweden. A girl of the same age as the artist's daughter had just been kidnapped there. He suggested that I make a sculpture of the girl. We placed the little girl's figure on the street corner and the animal figure five meters away from her. We wanted to see if anyone would stop. And yes, people who were old enough to be her parents would come up to her to ask why she was alone. Younger people started looking for her parents. This proves once again that we are social creatures after all.

city as a human body. police or firefighters react to my sculptures like white blood cells react to foreign bodies or pathogens in the blood

— In the fall you were on a residency in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Please tell us about that experience.

— Yes, I was invited by the organizers of the local street art festival. They were interested in what I could do with abandoned buildings bombed during the Yugoslav wars. They wanted to draw attention to it, because there are no high-quality restoration or revitalization projects in the city.

Also, according to locals, there is some tension between the Muslim and Orthodox communities in the city, and they would like to find some common ground. This was a project in a sensitive place, for people who still live with the trauma of war, but who want to have a dialogue.



— Aren't you afraid that the locals just might not understand what you mean?

— Yes, of course. I once helped Banksy with a project in Palestine. They looked at us like we were crazy. We took a cab and went to the local market. There were dumpsters right in the center of it, and I decided to place my sculptures there, as I had already done, for example, in New York.

We always get people's attention, people are always watching me when I set up sculptures, but this time literally everything around stopped and everyone was looking at us. I wanted to make the legs stick out of the trash and make the people around look like savages who were still shopping while there was a dead person next to them. A crowd gathered around us and began yelling at us. My assistant burst into tears, and I realized it was a complete failure. Then the police came and I explained to them what was going on. In the end it ended well, but it's a good example of a

Інстаграм Марка Дженкінса

Роботу «Камінь, Папір, Сокира» Марка Дженкінса можна побачити в Києві на виставці сучасного мистецтва в просторі МОТ з 17 лютого по 14 травня. Тема експозиції — «Тимчасовість».

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TEXT: HANNA TSUPKO

07/03/2023

SPOTLIGHT





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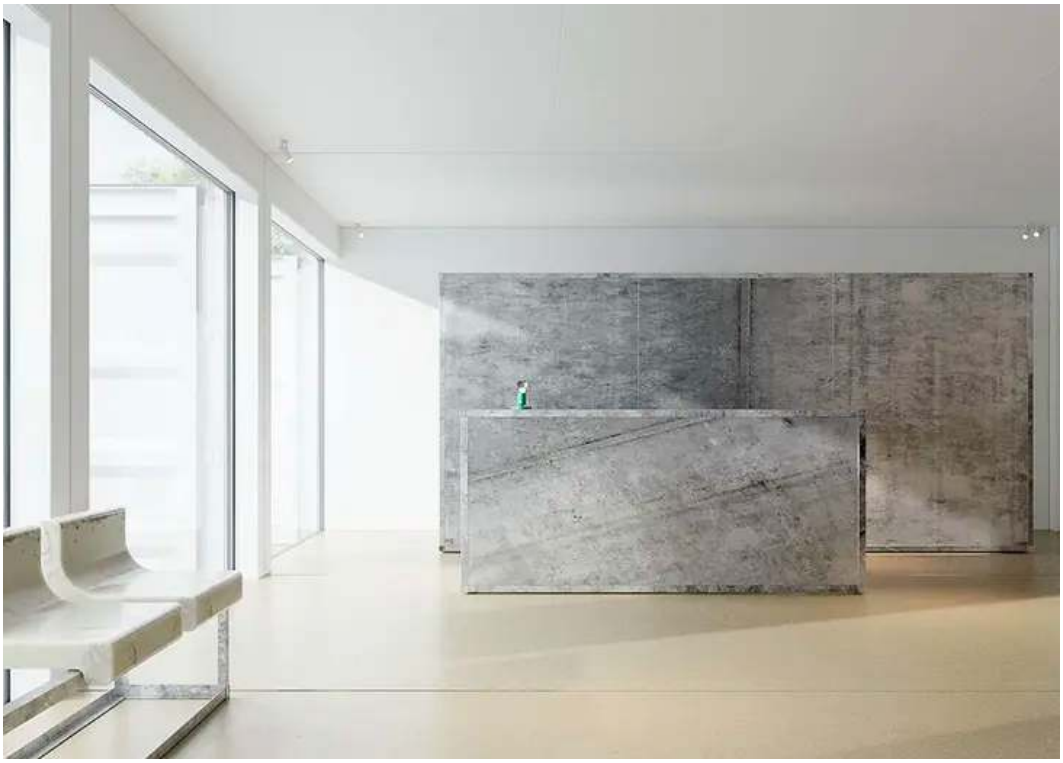
"MOT IS ABOUT THE FACT THAT EVEN IN THE MIDST OF UTTER DISASTER AND COLLAPSE, THERE REMAINS ROOM FOR LIFE", CURATOR FABRICE BOUSTEAU

ART



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