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JEPPE HEIN – HOW HE GOT OUR ATTENTION

Danish artist Jeppe Hein doesn't have a biographer, he has Finn Janning. The philosopher's two books *When Life Blooms* and *The Happiness of Burnout* serve as manifestos for understanding Hein's work. The following essay gives a first glimpse into this artist's mind.



ement = Life

I met Jeppe Hein for the first time in 1986, or perhaps in 1987, when we were 12 or 13 years old. He was wearing pink pants and had long curly hair and an earring. He looked different from the rest of the boys in the Danish provincial football club.

Some years later, as he reflected on his childhood, he told me that he always wanted attention, to be the center of the world, to be liked. Knowing that, I couldn't help but see—now as a young man—how well he had mastered getting attention, often through simple means like wearing colorful jackets or shiny shoes. Even today, as a mature man, he cares quite a lot about his look, that is, how he appears in the eyes of the others, although he does so much less than earlier.

Perhaps I can better describe who Jeppe Hein is as an artist by beginning in the middle. After all, the middle is where everything seems to pick up speed. In late 2009, he burned out. This incident illustrates that becoming is not about where someone—in this case, Jeppe Hein—originates or where he or she might arrive. His burnout was a process of becoming. In a way, this is obvious. The heroes of today's achievement-obsessed society are those who have suffered setbacks such as stress, depression, anxiety, or burnout and emerged stronger. Burnout produces new ways of relating to Jeppe Hein's previous art, just as it generated the possibility of novel ways of doing art.

For example, when I lived with Jeppe Hein in Copenhagen in the mid-nineties, he was trying to get admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and launch his debut within the art world. He was a person with a clear goal: To become a famous artist!

For some, this may not appear extraordinary, especially today, when

many people dream of status, prestige, and fame. Yet, in the nineties—just before the internet would change how people would relate to, inspire, and push one other—things were simpler. Furthermore, in Denmark, even today, the attitude is often that people shouldn't think too much of themselves. Of course, Jeppe Hein was not the only one with dreams, but among the group of artists and writers who hung out together, he was by far the most explicit about it.

Yet, unlike some other artists, who place their work within a complex theoretical framework, Jeppe Hein's approach has always been intuitive and playful. He doesn't care that much about the distinctions among art, design, architecture, and spiritual guidance. Thus, if you combine his playful approach with his interest in pleasing and teasing in order to be liked, you get art that is easy to interact with. That doesn't mean that his work lacks layers to interpret; rather, it means that one of his great strengths as an artist is an immediate and unsophisticated approach to the world. He is rarely deliberately polemical or conflict-seeking in his art.

Some of his earliest works play with our habits, such as when he lifted the skirting boards from the floor to place them in the middle of the wall, or when he combined his interests in skating and carpeting (he is a trained carpenter) by building ramps where people could skate (or just sit and drink). Later, when he matured as an artist, his work *360° Presence* (2002) featured a 70-centimeter steel ball waiting, like a loyal dog, for the audience to appear before it started to roll, crashing into walls. This work has always been a striking critique of neoliberalism, in which our movements generate serious consequences. Another work, *Distance*

(2004), once again is activated by a sensory mechanism, illustrating how everything is constantly affecting and being affected. The moral is clear: Movement = life.

Many critics describe Jeppe Hein's art as playful. I have gradually come to think that what he really aims at is sharing a feeling of hanging out with life. He is a social human being who thrives on the energy he receives when he affects other people. The adventurous work *Modified Social Benches* (since 2005) might be playful, but it could equally be seen as annoying. If you're tired and you wish to sit down, you might just fall off one of these bended benches. Similarly, the *Invisible Labyrinth* (2005) invites people to listen carefully to small beeps in their headset while walking around in an empty room, but even when we walk around blinded, the others are there—somewhere in the darkness. Unfortunately, on a more personal level, Jeppe Hein often finds it difficult to dwell in the moment, enjoying the effect his work is having, because he feels he needs to do more, to maintain or expand his brand. Being an artist in today's world, I assume, also means running a business.

Returning to the middle, then, during this burn-out period of his life, he underwent psychoanalysis and began doing yoga and meditation, practices that he would gradually integrate into his art. He became more conscious about what he really wanted to use his artistic power and resources to do. And how! Instead of seeing himself as an artist in the romantic sense—the archetypes are the writers Salinger or Pynchon, individuals who created but otherwise rarely interacted with the world—Jeppe Hein still needs attention, feedback, and contact with other people.

Of course, he is aware that his ego, at times, might still get in the way;

yet, what matters is not necessarily to dissolve his ego, but to become less and less selfish. Most of his latest pieces should be seen in this light. They reach out as they try to involve others, and by doing so, he tries to tell himself that it is not about him. "It's not about me," is actually a sentence he will often use, sometimes adding with a smile, "or maybe it is."

This illustrates another of his characteristics: He is honest. Personally, I find this to be enormously liberating. Far too many people are too polite to be honest; the result is all kinds of misery. In this honesty lies a vulnerability that makes it easier for people to relate to his work. He collapsed, after all. The level of achievement demanded by society and his own ambition almost erased him. He is not perfect.

For the same reason, he can say, as he does in his neon-statements: *TO ME YOU ARE PERFECT* (2015) – *YOU ARE PERFECT AS YOU ARE* (2014).

For a while, he told himself that; now he tells everyone else who needs to hear this.

The last time we spent a few days together, he had just started being more active on his Instagram. "I like the relationship with people," he said, then adding, "How can I get more followers?"

The critical reader might think this was an expression of narcissism or egoism. Yes, it's still there. Of course, all human beings need some kind of recognition and love; it's obvious. Jeppe Hein just needs it more. Yet, there are two sides to this story. One is an urge to present himself in a certain light: the creative, playful, and spiritual artist. The other is that he wishes to share this approach—not just to be confirmed, but to pass on something that he finds useful in his life. What motivates him today is a genuine desire to make the world more

caring and empathic. He accepts that for some, his art brings to mind popular psychological and spiritual statements that urge each person to turn around and look at him or herself. For example, to quote some of his statements: *I AM RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW* (2018) – *ALL WE NEED IS INSIDE* (2014) – *IN IS THE ONLY WAY OUT* (2016/2018) – *YOU CAN ONLY CHANGE YOURSELF* (2012).

All these have become small mantras for the artist. Mantras that he wishes to share.

He is conscious about his purpose as an artist.

Should art be normative? Is he moralizing? To be honest, I have no intention to prove that one form of being an artist is better than another. Personally, I feel less and less comfortable telling people how they might live better. I tend to become more uncertain or doubtful with age. Still, I can't say that this is proper approach; it's just another approach. Art can make us see the world differently. It can violate our previous assumptions and beliefs, forcing us to think.

So although I see Jeppe Hein as an artist who allows himself to become more normative, I also see a growing audience in need of guidance. There is, unfortunately, a demand for someone to tell people where to look, to tell them where they are and how they are. To say "Look inside; you're right here, and you're perfect." Seeing this, I admit, a part of me gets worried that we—as a society—have become so positive and optimistic that we are forgetting all the pain and suffering in the world. But then I look at Jeppe Hein, and he eases my concern, because he truly fits the cliché: His heart is in the right place. Furthermore, experiencing his work in action, I am filled with joy, as I notice the joy of all the others.

Lastly, it's important to mention how breath has become a key element in his most recent work. In the middle of it all, he literally had to take a timeout and learn to breathe again. Now, he shares this practice of breathing, not by guiding a meditation but by sharing some of the techniques he learned during his recovery from burnout: Painting his breath—one stroke, one breath.

While painting his own breath, he came to realize that maybe other people have forgotten that we are breathing beings. Once we stop breathing, we are dead. His work, *Breathe with Me*, is an event, a workshop, and a political statement all in one. People are invited to paint their breath on a canvas, next to other people's breaths, and so forth. In that sense, the breath both becomes an anchor that embeds each one of us in this world, here and now, and a way to experience that we are all related. Everything is interconnected.

So I am happy that, by finding his breath, Jeppe Hein has encountered what he had been looking for: something simple and direct but still powerful enough to catch our attention.



Finn Janning, PhD, is the author of two novels and seven works of nonfiction including *Happiness of Burnout – The case of Jeppe Hein* and *When life blooms – Breathe with Jeppe Hein*.