



In the Studio

Jeppe Hein

Berlin



**»Art has to come
from the heart.«**

Jeppe Hein, born 1974 in Copenhagen, is considered one

of the most important Scandinavian contemporary artists. His works combine elements of minimalist and conceptual art, and focuses on human interaction particularly in terms of social relationships. He recently realized his mirror work *Eye of the North* on the island of Svolvær in Norway's Lofoten archipelago and his project *Today I feel like* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt am Main, where visitors were invited to draw or paint their emotions on the museum's wall. We met the artist in his studio near Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin and talked to him about his relationship to art, about meditation as a source of inspiration, and about how a burnout changed his view of his work and own collecting activities.

Jeppe, you completed an apprenticeship as a furniture maker. To what extent did this apprenticeship influence your understanding of art and craftsmanship?

It influenced me a lot, I'm aware of its influence every day. When you have learned a craft, you have to practice it intensively. It has a great influence on how you think in everyday life and how you proceed with new projects. You develop a practice-oriented, structural knowledge that is very important for many processes. This has helped me not only at home, but particularly in the studio. When I talk to my colleagues and we discover something new, a new art technique, I have a much more immediate idea regarding its application which affords me a say in the implementation of the project. Every colleague here is an expert in his or her field, but with that knowledge you can challenge them a bit.

Where you aware as a child of wanting to become an artist?

No, absolutely not. I wanted to become a soccer player. Now I am forty-five years old and happy that I didn't become one for I would have been unemployed for fifteen years. The interest in art came from my parents.

After your apprenticeship you began to study art in Copenhagen in 1997. How did you come to this decision?

Before that, in 1991, I painted my first watercolor. My stepfather, Johan Jacobsen, was a painter. Most weekends I stayed in his studio right in the middle of the city and that inspired me. As a teenager – driven by an inner voice – I suddenly painted a watercolor. To discover art was something completely new for me. If you ask me now, I would say that it was a spiritual experience. At

that time, I thought that it was a language I didn't know; to suddenly be non-verbal, and be emotionally creative blew me away. So I tried it over and over again and that's how I started with art. I started with small-format watercolors. Then I painted on vessels. After finishing school I decided to go traveling. I spent one year in Asia, where I also painted. And when I came back, I actually wanted to study painting.

You applied for admission to art school...

Exactly. I studied at a small school with thirty-five students. There I spent the whole day making art and learning about art history, film, sound art, installation art, and performances. I was very interested in abstract painting and that's how I came into contact with the circle of artists around Asger Jorn. He is still my great role model today. In 1995 I wanted to go on to an art academy and applied in Copenhagen, but my application videos were too crazy, and the recording failed to work the first time. The following years I used my craft to help other artists. That's how I met Ólafur Elíasson and worked for him. And because I was very good with my hands, I also began assisting professors, which helped me with a second application the following year.





You just mentioned that you also worked as an assistant for Ólafur Elíasson. Did he influence you?

Yes of course. I was one of his first assistants and I was also the first to cook in his studio. He had a small studio, only two or three employees. I was allowed to travel around a lot, help build up his studio and learned a lot in the process. I was fortunate to meet many people. That also helped my career, because I always made a little bit of art on the side. So I was able to make contacts and organize my first exhibition. Ólafur was a great inspiration. At the time, he was making “natural wonder” art, very intense works that you can feel on your skin and in your heart. And I was directly involved, it was a wonderful feeling. Art has to come from the heart – I try to do that with all my work. He also always brought in playfulness. I try to do that as well.

What does a typical working process for an artwork look like in your case?

First I sit down and meditate. I used to get inspiration while traveling, simply keeping my eyes and ears open, activating my senses, feeling what's happening. How do I interact with people? How can I inspire an angry or tired person? I watch people, how they interact, what they might feel, how their movement pattern and social interaction is in everyday life. And I experiment. I develop ideas for art actions that take these people out of their personal comfort

zone. Watching people play is great because people come out of themselves and let go of their stiffness and control. I like doing that. And, like playing, I want to open people's hearts. I think my work does that quite well because it is playful both with the tools and with the art itself. I always use the term "tool" with regard to my artwork.

Which work or exhibition was particularly important for you and your personal development?

Moving Wall No. 1 in Frankfurt. This was my first interactive work. At that time, I watched how people interacted with it and I was happy about how it worked, and the pleasure people derived from communicating with my art.

The second work, which was very important, is *360° Presence*, the sphere at Johan König gallery. As soon as someone entered the gallery, motion sensors caused the steel ball to move slowly but in an unpredictable manner around the room, colliding with and damaging the walls. In effect, the viewers' presence in the gallery caused damage to the white cube. This was a completely new experience, a work of art destroying the gallery space. I liked the brutality of it, and the aspect of interactivity inasmuch as the rolling movement of the sphere caused by one's presence in the room, causing the borderline between the viewer and the artwork to become blurred, the sphere as a tool influencing the object.

And then I would like to point out my work *Invisible Labyrinth* in the Centre Pompidou. We weren't permitted to use fire, water, or smoke in the interior. So we thought for a long time about what we could do instead. An invisible labyrinth was the solution. One walked through this large room with a headset on. If it vibrated, it meant that you had walked into one of the imaginary walls. And when you stepped back a little bit, it stopped vibrating. This way you could navigate people through this huge room in the middle of Paris. A lot was about imagination. How does such an invisible work of art function? This kept me very busy, because it ties in with the fundamental question of art. What is a work of art? Then came the water works. I showed the first, *Fountains*, at the Venice Biennale. I still do them here and there quite often. And it's always exciting to build something like that in a new city, temporarily or permanently.





As you just indicated, community and interaction play an important role in your art. Why did you put this at the center of your work?

Growing up in Denmark, you experience social relationships very differently than in Germany. Society, the school system, and friendships all function differently. It is a small country. Education and art studies are free. You even get money for studying. This gives you different motives to make art. In the UK, for example, you have to earn money to pay off student loans. The more positive interaction in society and with my parents, who are old hippies, have had a great influence on

my life and my art, particularly the interaction with people and the exchange with one another.

In 2019, you co-initiated the art project *Breathe with Me* in New York for the Un Climate Summit. How did it feel to be part of such a big event?

Breathe with Me is a joint project with ART 2030, a non-profit organization that brings art together with the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations. The UN had asked us in the context of the official focus of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly on Climate Protection whether we would like to do the project at the UN Headquarters. After all, we got the most prominent place inside the foyer. It was incredible. We were very excited, but also well prepared. The cooperation on site worked well. Everything had to be concrete, no matter what you said or wrote, because these are huge, bureaucratic institution. But when we stood there next to Bill Gates and Angela Merkel, and saw these people breathing together, it was crazy. I had previously written a letter to Chancellor Merkel asking her if she herself would like to participate, and we received a nice letter in response saying unfortunately, she didn't have time. But the deputy UN Secretary General Amin J. Mohammed and Michael Bloomberg participated, as did young climate activists, and indigenous people from the Amazon. It was nice to feel how community can be created through art. Three hundred people breathed with us during these three days. Afterwards we spent another three days in Central Park and a total of over 3,000 people participated in the project. Among them were 800 New York students who had become aware of the project through our cooperation with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was very intensive on many levels. The people were enthusiastic.

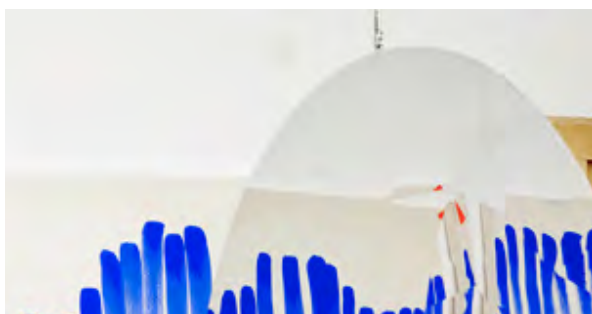
Some say you are a conceptual artist, others think you do minimal or kinetic art. How would you classify your work?

Last week I had a conversation with Dan Graham, who is a very good friend of mine. We met in 1994 while working for Ólafur and we had many exhibitions together. Dan and I have changed a lot over the years. At the time, both our work was very minimalist. He talked a lot about architecture and minimal sculpture. So did I. And now we both talk a lot more about the social aspect of our artistic work. Ten years ago, when my second life began after my severe burnout, I started to look at my work in a completely different way. Not that I gave up things. I still make mirrors. But before that I mainly brought minimalist sculptures to life. One had a cube or a white cube, one had movements in art. The artwork began to tremble when one came close to it. Art was afraid of the viewer. Minimal sculpture. It was about surface, form, lines! My sculptures have always been social. "Trust the artwork." Sit on it. If you ask me, I am now working even more with social issues and yet I have kept my radical minimalism, as minimal as possible. Even my email is very minimal. With it I try to uncover the

social aspects of our society. This has been the focus of my work for fifteen years: How do you deal with yourself, how do you deal with people?

Do you also see yourself as a political artist since you deal so intensively with political issues?

I wouldn't say no to that. My projects often have a political statement. I would call that activist. But I still believe that much of my art has no concrete language, no concrete political statement. It is the art critics and art historians who translate the form, who interpret the work. Many artists don't work like that, with a clear form, and concept, but simply bring what they feel to the outside world. For me, art has a universal language. No matter where you come from, regardless of country or culture. A sculpture can tell you the same thing everywhere.





With other media you have talked a lot about your burnout. To what extent has this changed your art?

It was a big break for my entire life. I asked myself: What do I want? I used to want a Porsche. Now I am the Porsche. That was a quote from an exhibition at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. The form of my art is still the same, but the content has expanded. I have gained a spiritual view. A collector I met recently bought a very early work of mine. *Enlightenment* – at that time I didn't even know what the term actually meant, I found it superficially simply beautiful. Now I question my work more strongly. I think there is a consciousness. It's up there and we have

to bring it down. I'm trying to do that: to give everything from my heart for my art, even when I'm angry, to articulate my feelings. Lately it's been difficult for all of us, but also very instructive. I have observed myself, meditated, participated in yoga. New feelings come up and I try to implement them. I wanted to show this in Frankfurt at the Schirn: to invite people to paint their feelings on the white wall, as emojis.

Is this your biggest project right now? The faces Today I feel like?

This is very much in focus right now. It's a very easy way to show your feelings, your vulnerability, and your mood because it's very quick and easy to paint. I also have a t-shirt company that offers t-shirts with my faces on them. At Copenhagen airport we let people paint their emotions on the wall, like in Frankfurt, in the middle of this transit place. If you had asked me years ago whether I would paint again, I would have rejected the idea. But it just came back, and it's nice to see the reactions of people participating here as well.

Do you have other projects right now?

The biggest project at the moment is on an island in the Lofoten archipelago, a big mirror work. *Eye of the North* is a reflective concave-convex installation. The points where the mirrors collect the light show the star constellation of the northern hemisphere. I am curious how this will work.

This fall I will also travel to Greenland to give workshops with Greenlandic social educators, teachers, and educators in the local schools and kindergartens with *Today I feel like* and *Breathe with Me*.

What projects are you planning for the future?

We are currently working on many art-in-architecture projects, for example for the Arken Museum of Modern Art, in the town of Ishøj, near Copenhagen. We are building thirty red lamps that will guide visitors from the train station to the museum: Street lamps – as a reference to Martin Kippenberger – that are both path pillars and lighting at the same time. We are also realizing a large mirror work for Novo Nordisk.

There will also be solo exhibitions in 2021, at my galleries KÖNIG GALERIE in Berlin and Galleri Nicolai Wallner in Copenhagen, at the Herbert Gerisch Foundation in Neumünster, and in public spaces in Baden-Baden. In three group exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Kiel, Kunsthal KAdE in Amersfoort, Holland, and KUNSTEN in Aalborg, Denmark, I will be exhibiting several works in my own space.



What are your artistic and personal wishes for your future?

I am a family man and take more time for my family. Besides, I'm also doing a lot

of fun projects right now. A workshop with a school. A mobile coffee bar in Frankfurt, Smil Kaffe, which I have painted. And then I have been working on a cookbook for two years. What do colors taste like? We have been cooking ourselves for many years and have a kitchen garden on the studio. And I have organized four dinners for the next few months, with artists, scientists and cooks. I want to create a community experience. A book should also emerge from this. And I have published a Yoga book with art. That came from the heart.

Do you also collect art yourself or do you support young artists?

In Copenhagen I co-founded the Karriere Bar, which unfortunately no longer exists. It was a huge project involving artists like Dan Graham, Cardiff/Miller, Ceal Floyer, Tino Sehgal, Franz Ackermann, Elmgreen & Dragset, Monica Bonvicini, and Ólafur Elíasson. We showed permanent art in a bar. It was about bringing art into everyday life. If you're already sitting in a restaurant anyway, you can also look at art.

Very early on, during my own residency, I started sharing work with my colleagues. I received art and gave my art in return. Then I often had artists in my studio and supported them with purchases. And still I exchange a lot with artists I know. I avoid exchanging only one work, but I would always like to have an overall picture of the artist, that is important to me. So always four or five works that show, who the artist is.

You went to the Städelschule and then worked in Berlin. How did you come to the decision to make art in Germany?

Ólafur always told me to leave Denmark as soon as possible. The Danish culture is small. So is the art scene. I studied in Copenhagen for two years and founded the artist group Otto with two women, curated exhibitions, worked for Ólafur, and traveled a lot. Then I studied with Thomas Bayrle. I really wanted to work with him. I moved within ten days. And I came to Berlin through Ólafur Elíasson. First I slept on a mattress in his studio, and then I got my own apartment. The energy of the city was incredible at that time. Everything seemed possible.





Breathe with Me at United Nations Headquarters, September 21–24, 2019, An art project by Jeppe Hein and ART 2030

Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin / London, 303 GALLERY, New York, and Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen

Photo: Jan Stempel



Invisible Labyrinth, 2005, Material: Headset, infrared sensors, infrared emitters, control board, charging board, Dimensions: variable

Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin / London, 303 GALLERY, New York, and Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen

Photo: Keizo Kioku, exhibited in Kanazawa, 2011



Eye of the North, 2020, High polished stainless steel, substructure, 800 x 500 x 170 cm, Permanent installation at Langåsen Natur- og Skulpturpark, Svolvær, Lofoten, Norway

Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin / London, 303 GALLERY, New York, and Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen

Photo: Kjell Ove Stovrik



Today I feel like ... Schirn, Participative art project at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt a.M., Germany, 2020

Courtesy the artist, KÖNIG GALERIE, Berlin / London, 303 GALLERY, New York, and Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen

Photo: Schirn Kunsthalle / Lena Sobczinski

Interview: Kevin Hanschke

Photos: [Franziska Rieder](#)

Links:

- [Jeppe Hein's website](#)
- [König Galerie, Berlin](#)
- [303 GALLERY, New York](#)
- [Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen](#)