

NO WAY OUT

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen

Gean Moreno: *In your work, you scoff at optimistic, liberatory claims people often make for drugs, youth culture, and even Green or communitarian economies.*

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen: I use pop culture as a vehicle for dark messages. I'm quite pessimistic when it comes to our culture, but at the same time I'm living in it. That is why I'm interested in using cultural references and mixing them with more sinister things. Pop culture is very innocent and happy.

GM: *This pessimism may provide an alternative way to approach the world, but it is ultimately a metaphorical alternative. How do you view artists like N55 or Superflex, who are looking for physical alternative methods to live by?*

HPJ: I really appreciate people who try to set down some alternatives, but I'm not able to do that. I'm more interested in diagnosing our current situation. I don't want to propose some alternatives, because I don't really see any. Often, alternatives are escapist—constructive and escapist, at the same time. I appreciate these people [like N55 and Superflex] because they treat art as a lab, as a way of thinking differently from people who have a 9 to 5 job.

GM: *Collaboration is in its own way an alternative model (in artmaking, at least). How does collaboration figure in your thinking?*

HPJ: I was very much into the idea of collaborating at one point. It is more fun to work with other people and more interesting to have someone to discuss things with. It also blurs this idea of the artist as a lonesome genius. I'm still doing collaborations but not at the same scale I used to. The collaboration now takes places at other levels—teaching, organizing seminars, books. I mean, I don't distinguish these things from my production as an artist.

GM: *Is there a tradition of politically motivated art in Denmark you feel a part of?*

HPJ: Yes, there are a lot of artist who work with problems in the real world. I'm interested in that. I have a hard time just playing with colors. I'm interested in biotechnology, economics, existential issues. It's a combination of culture, history and politics.

GM: *A problem I sometimes find with participatory projects is that the element of participation is often treated as if it were beyond reflection. Words like 'generosity' and 'inclusiveness' are tossed around as inscrutable evidence of the work's political forwardness and necessity. The laughing gas projects you did seem a critical parody of this participatory aesthetic.*

HPJ: They were critical, one could say, but the aim was also to become involved in this participatory field. The original idea was to create a project that had no matter, only molecules working on the brain. For me, it's always been a dream to make social sculpture. It's like trying to establish some sort of alternative, and I appreciate the people who are doing it. But I don't really believe in it. It is almost always a fake investment when you go into a local community and try to do some good. I'm very suspicious of that. It's problematic because sometimes you will harm people, especially if you go outside of the artworld. There were these artists who tried to do something with drug addicts and they brought so much media attention to the project and the park where the addicts resided that they [the addicts] had to leave. It's a beautiful dream but it isn't going to work as an artistic project. I gave up on it.

GM: *You have used props from horror films—the spinning bed from Poltergeist and the bathroom from Psycho. These works seem to be less about movies or the formal concerns of sculpture than about the poverty of our shared cultural references, the homogenization of our ideas.*

HPJ: I wanted to do something that involved Hollywood, which is almost as ubiquitous in Europe as it is in America. On the one hand, it's nice to have all these shared general references. On the other hand, it's depressing, because it's pretty much the same wherever you go. But I was also interested in this strange relation between the bathroom or the shower and murder. The shower is a key place for anxiety. Think of when you are alone in an apartment in the shower, you are very vulnerable. These elements from films become part of your dreams and fears. I don't know if it is the films that make them so or one's mind. It's like the current paranoia over anthrax. It's disproportionate with the number of deaths it has caused. Many more people die in traffic every day. It is really strange how we behave.

GM: *Like the Hollywood-based pieces, you're earlier installations—the burned down kindergarten, the vandalized café, etc.—seem to be stinging commentaries on certain traits in the culture.*

HPJ: The burnt down kindergarten is about impermanence, death, and security. The idea behind it was that when you drop off your kids at kindergarten you expect to come back and they're still there.

GM: *I was thinking of the pieces as commentaries on our perverse fascination with catastrophes and misfortune.*

HPJ: In a way [they are]. Catastrophes as a phenomenon are fascinating because they are what make life change. It's never the good stuff. Whether personal or historical, catastrophes produce change. And the memory of them is much stronger than the memory of good things. You can see that in Europe—the memories of the two World Wars are everywhere. Even if people don't think about them, they refer to them all the time. In America, you have the Vietnam War.

GM: *You have produced a number of projects and texts critical of the Nasdaq economy—the spectacle economy on which you speculate on ideas and possibilities rather than on profits. What will occur now that the dotcom economic bubble burst?*

HPJ: The phenomenon we call the “New Economy” is exceptional, because it was based not on the turn around of a company but on the new products they *may* launch. But speculation is always one of the premises of the economy. To a certain extent, all stocks are based on speculation. I think things will return to a normal pace now. I mean, no one was making any profit on the Internet—this was the absurdity of it.

GM: *Are there alternatives to the economic/political/cultural structure we live with?*

HPJ: No, I don’t think there are any, because I don’t believe anyone really wants to live any other way. What we have now is not just a capitalist structure, a free market. There is a great deal of government involvement in the economy. It’s very important to keep in mind that there are these other elements working. You can’t escape our situation if you want to have a government.

GM: *Can Western societies become affluent enough so even alternatives can be traded in the market? People often present different ways to live as art and are sustained and promoted by the art world through sales, grants, etc.*

HPJ: Maybe. Alternatives are possible on a small scale—one or two individuals. But in terms of general structures, there are no alternatives.

GM: *But then, why not take a cynical approach? Why not play with color and forms and make truckloads of money? I mean, your desire to diagnose our current situation insinuates that, contrary to what you have just said, there are other ways to live and in some way you are interested in them.*

HPJ: The times of general alternative structures are over at the present, but that does not mean that there is not a space for criticism. I think we still have to be suspicious and angry about the structures and institutions that we have to face our lives with. But the aim behind the criticism is, for my part, not to impose another structure, but to act like a virus within the existing structure, and generate some disturbance that might provoke some thoughts about life and society. I find it hard to do this with just using a cynical approach, it would be easy to end up with an ironical attitude, and this is something I am not interested in. However, I do make a decent living from my art, so maybe I am somehow quite cynical.