

ZORBA THE BUDDHA

In my own dabblings with Buddhist practice one of the things I've always had a bit of a hard time with is the Buddha's insistence on life as suffering. Turning life on this planet into something like a necessary evil, the main purpose of which basically would be to overcome itself in order to get out of the cycle of deaths and re-births and reach enlightenment. This always struck me as very depressing and nihilistic and basically as something like a waste of life. At the same time a practice is exactly that and something meant to be experienced rather than read or thought about and I must say that the people I know who were raised as Buddhists always seemed the most apt at simply enjoying things for what they are, so maybe it is just a question of me being a bit overzealous in my understanding.

Nevertheless it can be interesting here also to compare with the romantic idea of the 'suffering artist'. At a point in time in the early 19th century when people first started having enough free time not to have to stand bent over in a field or factory all day just to support themselves, they also needed to start thinking about themselves as something other than just farmers or factory workers and artists took on a role almost as a kind of proto humans meant to suffer for their art, reaching for their innermost selves in order to formulate the human condition in a way that would make sense to the general public. If we take something like writer's block, there each time seems to be a period before writing a text (including the one you are currently reading!) of serious doubts as to whether one will ever be able to come up with something as good as before or even again to write anything whatsoever at all. Or stage fright, with actors and performers feeling revulsion and something like physical pain in anticipation of getting up to do what it is that they enjoy the most.

To get to the work of Henrik Plenge Jakobsen now, this extremely prolific artist always seemed blissfully spared from any kind of hindrances or self-doubts simply from the sheer volume of his production spilling over in multicolor spinning and blinking in any conceivable artistic medium possible. The only excuse for this megalomania must be some basic contradictory double bind kind of hidden message hovering somewhere back and forth between Existentialist broodings. Wasted youth. The meaning of life. Between celebration and angst, the teen catchword sometimes invoked simply by being spelt out in capital letters against a deceitfully colorful background. Or printed repeatedly on festive garden party light lanterns that atmospherically sit swinging from trees. Another reoccurring favourite has been the pirate flag's skull and bones that keep coming up both as a non too subtle reminder of human mortality and emblem of a kind of 'fuck it all' punk stance broad smile grinning straightforwardly in honest happy sadness. Ainsi Serons Nous Tous.

Clearly things have come a long way from the kind of 'bad boy' provocation some of these works have borrowed part of their vocabulary from and in fact first can be mistaken for. Between the drawn-out hysteria of public ritual and the importance and sometimes impossibility of individual choice, of civil disobedience, of not always doing exactly what's expected from you. Polarities are set up in a series of works that include laughing gas and that taken together will stake out the progression from first being introduced as an opening night offer part of an early nineties 'happening' kind of party art, with the at

least half-fun idea of inhaling nitrous oxide momentarily altering one's perception of what things are supposed to be like and making the head spin just for a bit.

Soon enough though as laughing gas installations start appearing in sterile gallery settings and exhibition halls the whole feel changed into something more of a laboratory test site situation with yourself meant to freewillingly volunteer as the laboratory rat. With works such as *Laughing Gas House for Children* (1998) or *Laughing Gas Chamber* (1996) the ominous grey shells of the metal gas tubes took on even more sinister connotations and where you as a viewer would be implicated in some kind of criminal activity it seemed, simply from coming to look at them let alone make use of them.

Of course, in recent years the artworld has seen a number of explorations of the audience participatory format and the sometimes stated intention of coming to terms with the 'passivity' and lack of engagement of its viewers. When it comes to artworks in public space however things will function a little bit differently. With this format it sometimes seems more or less having been invented for generating conflict between the wide variety of views of what would be a 'good' artwork and the given artist's proposal. Not so surprising also maybe given that the element of free choice of going to see something often here is eliminated in favour of a kind of 'chance encounter' or even worse having something imposed in the area where you live or work.

Even less surprising maybe is the fact of Plenge having had his fair share of controversy and heated debate around some of his proposed artworks for public space. One such example could be the 1:1 full scale prison *Watchtower* (2001) that was designed as part of an outdoor exhibition in the German smalltown of Kiel. Even with the stated possibility of entering the tower and use it to experience a reversal in surveillance's power balance etc. one can't help but understand how this structure felt like an intrusion. It should be said however as a token of the tolerance of the good inhabitants of Kiel that the watchtower was allowed its full two-month run exhibition period unlike as another example that most-talked-about-in-Scandinavia-public-work of art ever the trashed cars and one bus part of the *Burn Out* (in collaboration with Jes Brinch 1994) installation on Kongens Nytorv in Copenhagen that only lasted for the first week of its intended three months.

The same questions of guilt, individual responsibility and trying to be something like a good citizen are the subject also in the recent 'total installation' *J'Accuse* (2005) based on what probably was the most publicized scandal ever surrounding the Dreyfus trials in late 19th century France and the famous case made by writer Emile Zola. Simply from staging the various props involved in the courtroom proceedings together with press clippings and the excentric judge's garb and paraphernalia quite seamlessly will be brought home the point that we are never 'outside' or neutral to events going on around us – even while involved in such wilfully obscure activities such as the writing of 'fiction' novels or engineering the broad brushstrokes for 'painting' the troubling habits of present day society. Held in the strict for or against B/W of late capitalist 'spectacle economy' and without even the catharsis moment usually served up in theatre or film viewers here simply are left out to the audience participatory activity of having to make up their own minds. With something much more stretched out in time and painfully interlinked as it seems with your own living experience situation.

Maybe it is true in the end what the Buddha said that life is shit. Why would people be so touchy feely otherwise about being told as much. Quite rightfully feeling maybe that they

have enough problems as it is without having to take in abstract Self XXXpressions from someone they know they can't trust. Mary and Joseph. You only get what is good. Repression depression. Fill in the blanks. Burn out is something that happens to office workers. Mouse arm. Tell me all about it.

Nevermind that the originator of the Either-Or dilemma and Existentialism's forefather Søren Kierkegaard himself once walked the very Copenhagen streets where Plenge now has his day to day existence. Even though for a set of hommages to some of Denmark's outsider innovators he would choose slightly less iconic figures, or exactly the ones expecting the unexpected doing things a little bit differently than you're supposed to. All men incidentally but still forming a kind of canon to the firm belief in the 'performance enhancing' and liberatory effect of the creative act, tourist travel tycoon and poseur hedonist Simon Spies, furniture and interior designer and color alchemist Verner Panton and last but not least the public space decoration painter Poul Gernes a.k.a. Brother Poul whose multicolor geometric abstraction murals have lent not a little expression to the multicolor geometric abstraction murals of Plenge only with the addition of capital letter legends such as the aforementioned 'ANGST' or 'UNREAL' 'ALIENATION' and 'EVERYTHING IS WRONG'.

In fact Plenge once told me that where he grew up outside of Copenhagen was not far from the Herlev hospital that is considered to be one of the gems of Gernes' public space decorating commissions. Without digging too deep into some kind of biographical background I think it can be fair to assume that this in fact is where it all began. With Plenge as a kid because of a vaccination shot or bruised knee or some other kind of emergency that happens to kids being dragged down the hospital corridors to an emergency room somewhere between the Gernes trademark colored stripes and targets while crying bloody murder, screaming and kicking all the way. It's colorful. It hurts. It's beautiful. I'm scared.