

All that is Solid Melts into Airⁱ

Object and Constellation

A 1992 installation, *Of Light and Love and Immortality*, has a central position in Henrik Plenge Jakobsen's work. The title comes from a poem by the Romantic, British poet Percy B. Shelley and the installation's physical elements are taken from a hospital, a music conservatory and the National Museum in Copenhagen. The artist describes it as one of his first works using found objects. From that point on, the pairing of existing objects with visual and literary references has been at the core of his production. Broadly, it is a method that, in various ways, has characterized art since the early avant-garde. Still, there is a distinct character to Plenge Jakobsen's instrumentalization of the practice. In the 1980s, so-called postmodernism also worked with combining diverse objects and references in a single work. Unlike the postmodern art production, however, Plenge Jakobsen is interested more in the individual meanings of the referents and their interrelationships than in their collective and mutually leveling form of appearance.

Examining the reuse of already existing materials – text, objects, the works of other artists – in 1990s art, the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud recently defined the practice by the term “postproduction.”ⁱⁱ Radically different from the ready-made tradition, postproduction art seeks to imbue already existing cultural forms with new meaning by combining them. This reading is clearly relevant in terms of Plenge Jakobsen's work, which specifically centers on the interrelations of elements and their ways of activating each other.

Parallels to Plenge Jakobsen's handling of found objects are also found in certain fields of 1960s art, notably the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica's concept of “Trans-Objects.” Oiticica coined the term to describe his use of existing objects in his 1963 series *Bolides*.ⁱⁱⁱ Oiticica's term is surprisingly applicable to the way Plenge Jakobsen uses found objects in his sculptural arrangements. Oiticica writes, “What I do, on transforming it [the pre-fabricated object] into a work, is not simply to make the object ‘lyrical,’ or place it outside the everyday, but incorporate it into an aesthetic idea, making it part of the genesis of the work, it thus assumes a transcendental character, participating in a universal idea without losing its previous structure. Hence

the designation ‘Trans-Object.’”^{iv}

Like Oiticica, Plenge Jakobsen can be said to identify and incorporate the object’s original structure in the work. Moreover, Plenge Jakobsen’s objects are not found in the sense that they were discovered by chance. He consciously employs objects that will contribute to realizing an idea he already has. This also means that he is not interested in the possible symbolic potential of the objects. Already existing objects are not used as actual ready-mades (the overall narrative of the work does not involve the displacement of the object in itself), but become part of a constellation with other materials/objects specifically based on their original function. This is apparent in Plenge Jakobsen’s sculpture series *Kapital Melankolie* (contributed to the *Adorno* exhibition at Frankfurter Kunstverein in 2003), consisting of small cut-glass prisms clamped between shiny steel circular-saw blades or black vinyl records of Arnold Schönberg 12-tone compositions, respectively. Plenge Jakobsen here used glass prisms as a direct and utilitarian reference to show how the true meaning of a radical project, such as Schönberg’s, lies in the prismatic dispersion of ideas – cf. the function of a prism: collecting a light source and dispersing it again in separate spectrums. These otherwise functional objects, vinyl records and circular saw blades that – clamping the prisms, they are irredeemable stuck in their pedestals – allude to Adorno’s failed attempt to popularize 12-tone music. Based on their function, the selected objects gain specific meaning in terms of both the work’s content and its formal sculptural expression.

Reality and Situationism

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen’s early art practice was expressed in a series of distinct assaults on the public space. In the 1990s, Plenge Jakobsen and his collaborator, the Danish artist Jes Brinch, executed a number of installations and tableaux, subjecting sections of daily life to disastrous mediation. In a 1994 installation, *Burned Out Kindergarten*, the two artists transformed Galleri Nicolai Wallner into a complete kindergarten interior with child-sized furniture, colorful murals, a coatroom with tiny backpacks and children’s outdoor clothing, as well as a small slide and toys. The room and the furnishings were blackened and partially burned, however, as if a fire had swept through the kindergarten. Later, in the radical outdoor tableau *Smashed Parking*, the two artists placed a number of wrecked cars and a toppled city-bus on

Kongens Nytorv, one of Copenhagen's daintiest squares. Resembling a cross between an auto graveyard and the wake of a riot, *Smashed Parking* modified the experience of upscale central Copenhagen. A third collaborative installation, *The Teacher*, from 1997, was in the form of a standard classroom, replete with desks, chairs and blackboard, plus a skeleton lying across the teacher's desk in a pool of blood and raw meat. All three works – kindergarten, parking lot and classroom – questioned certain fundamental aspects of the Danish welfare model: safe childcare; the recreational, democratic function of the public space; and the smooth security of the public school system.

Many of Plenge Jakobsen's own works have revolved around the omnipresence of institutions and the institution as a basic condition of existence in Scandinavia today. A 2001 installation, *Toll*, addressed the public hospital system. In the exhibition space, he placed authentic furnishings from a psychiatric hospital in marked-off zones that were just identifiable as examination room, convalescent ward, TV room, employee lounge, workshop, etc. The installation is obviously rooted in the artist's fascination with psychiatry, which he considers to be a kind of parallel universe to our well-oiled civilization, while simultaneously, in a Foucaultian sense, serving to constitute that self-same normal society. In this bleak display of objects from psychiatric institutions, Plenge Jakobsen punctures the image of an adequate healthcare system providing qualified service to citizens of the welfare state. *Toll*, like *The Teacher* and *Burned Out Kindergarten*, stages the exhibition space as a slice of reality. These and other earlier works demonstrate the characteristic incorporation of real life that in various ways has been occupying Plenge Jakobsen ever since.

Indeed, a lot of art in the 1990s reflected this tendency, exploring and revealing mechanisms and structures that shift reality or even reveal it as a construction. Plenge Jakobsen's work extends that fascination, but instead of debating reality and its credibility in his works, he inserts fragments of reality, in the form of objects or entire interiors, into the actual works. Naturally, this whole practice also touches on art's autonomy and the question of whether the artwork exists in its own privileged sphere or is an integrated part of the world. On the autonomy issue, Plenge Jakobsen says, "The artwork, as I see it, is part of the world. For me, the notion of the autonomous work is tantamount to attributing religious qualities to the artwork, and then you are

operating in another field than art. Still, we keep returning to ‘autonomy’ not for its religious potential, but because art, while it has to be a part of the world, also has to carve out its own space or its own premise for existing as something apart from the rest of the world. A place establishing other ideas, possibilities and meetings that are not possible outside that space.”^v

The collaborations with Jes Brinch, as well as many of Plenge Jakobsen’s own works, can be described as situations located in a zone between action and performance. In fact, Plenge Jakobsen has often mentioned Situationism as an important source of inspiration for his work. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, the French thinker and activist Guy Debord in 1967 criticized modern society for having developed into a market-based, superficial spectacle where culture and capital flow together and reproduce each other. Debord noted that the capitalist order had consolidated itself by use of the self-same economic, productional, social and cultural potentials on which the revolution ought to have been based. In frustration, he formulated Situationism as a strategy for restarting the revolutionary movement – an avant-garde that would unite art and politics in a true critique of existing society and enable the masses to seize the situation, life and the world.^{vi} According to Debord, an alternative to this spectacle and the conventional, now capitalized form of art was an open situation with real and unpredictable development potential. This line of thinking is a significant element in Plenge Jakobsen’s actionist and situation-based works, which are situated directly in “reality.” *Smashed Parking* is a case in point, *Dollar Drop* from 2004 is another. In this action, performed in joint with the Danish artist Jonas Maria Schul, a convoy of four trucks loaded with construction debris paraded through Copenhagen’s Herlev suburb, while the two artists scattered 1000 one dollar bills from the back of one truck. People instinctively dived for the bills, as the action, with a literalness characteristic of the genre, demonstrated that our behavior, actions and relations are controlled by economics.

Plenge Jakobsen’s project is socio-critical in the sense that he examines and discusses political, economical, cultural and social structures forming the foundation of modern life. Like the Situationists, he is interested in finding a meaningful art form capable of defining a place in the public space, while directly making use of everyday institutions. His project does not seek to cannibalize reality but to incorporate reality

into the work itself. His work is radical exactly because it insists on the work's real presence rather than interrogating the foundation of reality. For Plenge Jakobsen, art and reality are not separate spheres that can be temporarily forced together. Existing in the world, art represents one of the realities that constitute life.

Relation and Exchange

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen's work can be described as a configuration of visual elements in spatial arrangements, often involving an additional element of action or performance. Many of his works combine sculptural elements and objects in a plastic display positioned between sculpture and installation. Differing from the theatrical and systemic, "total" form of classic installation art, Plenge Jakobsen's installation stratagems are based on a more unrestrained, flexible arrangement in which the room is merely an arbitrary architectural frame rather than a meaningful collaborator. That is, more Broodthaers than Kabakov.^{vii}

Laughing Gas Chamber from 1996 can be considered in extension of the practice described by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998's *Relational Aesthetics* and elsewhere. Inviting viewers to inhale a dose of laughing gas in a custom-made chamber, the work acts as a tool or practical catalyst for an exchange between work and audience. Together with the sculptural quality, this immaterial, social interaction constitutes the dual intention of the piece. Plenge Jakobsen's chamber can be viewed as a somewhat morbid version of the social generosity distinguishing the works Bourriaud includes in his *Relational Aesthetics*. Instead of a piece of candy, a Pad Thai or a massage,^{viii} viewers get a narcotic buzz that rather radically transforms their consciousness and whole experience of the world. Perhaps a new position for Plenge Jakobsen's and other artists' works can be defined – a post-relational understanding located, via the intermixing of art with entertainment, economics, politics and thinking, in a field pointing beyond art itself but still allowing for a connection back to the work as statement and artistic expression. The generosity of these works may be less direct and tangible than the standard established by the "classic" relational aesthetic works of the early 1990s. Then again, their social generosity consists in presenting a possible model, a statement, for free use, rather than considering the viewers a condition for the work or holding them hostage in it. Interactivity certainly features prominently in

Plenge Jakobsen's works, but the interactive level rests on an exchange of ideas between work and viewer more than actual physical audience participation. His works always take off from a purely formal, aesthetic premise, ensuring that the exchange with the audience never becomes a condition for the work but remains simply an option. The potential for participation is what counts; the actual realization of that potential is secondary.

Many of Plenge Jakobsen's works are actual actions or incorporate performance or performative situations. He sees actions as a kind of extra enzyme for the reception of the work and the audience's exchange with it.^{ix} Moreover, the action is deteriorative, or in any case transformative, concerning the artwork's conventional status as fetishistic object. For Plenge Jakobsen, this integration of actions is entirely central, "The object linked to the action is far more important than the object linked to the interaction."^x Accordingly, his works never leave any doubt about the artist's presence in the work or his personal choreographing of its meanings. His works never look like the apparently accidental remains of a social event but stand out as precisely formulated, plastic statements.

In a critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, the theorist Claire Bishop discusses Bourriaud's definition of relational works as democratically "open-ended platforms." Bishop notes that democracy presupposes antagonism, an inherent opposition or conflict that can ensure evolution and prevent frictionless consensus. Thus, she argues, some works merely confirm the reality of which they are a part without really indicating or enabling an inclusion of other realities.^{xi} In other words, they simply facilitate a self-confirming, existing practice. Plenge Jakobsen's art, for its part, precisely contains the antagonistic dimension Bishop is calling for. His works have inherent resistance in the diversity of their materials, the seemingly illogical composition of their references, their mix of existing objects and sculpturally shaping elements and in the fact that the objects he includes both retain their original function and acquire a new aesthetic function in the work. Plenge Jakobsen's works return a new, possible order to the world whose objects and texts they borrow. Such an exchange, as Bishop notes, is a requirement for change and critique. Or put in a more Debordian way, the society of the spectacle pacifies the individual and prevents critique exactly by avoiding change and actual social relations. The undifferentiation

and the rampant, pacifying culture industry as described by Debord are the premise of one of Plenge Jakobsen's more complex productions, *Circus Pentium* from 2003-2005^{xii}, a total installation of sculpture, video, text, performance and music. The project revolves around an opera libretto written by Plenge Jakobsen, telling the story of the gradual breakup of a derelict circus. The members of the circus troupe are drawn from modernism's cast of characters: a hysterical woman being treated by Freud, an omnipresent computer processor, a tiger that has had a sex-change operation, Kafka's *Hunger Artist* and a cruel circus manager with a double identity as a financial mogul and Adorno the philosopher, who ultimately falls victim when his troupe rebels.

A key source of inspiration for the circus project is the aforementioned Theodor W. Adorno who, with co-author Max Horkheimer, voiced a critique of the culture industry in their rambling and pessimistic but horribly precise *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from 1944. The two philosophers challenge western civilization's faith in the Enlightenment project, which in their eyes has evolved into a forward-looking, rationalistic, empirical system dissolving irregularity, uncertainty and unreason by absorbing them as part of its structure. The two thinkers demonstrate how art, traditionally considered an otherness or a free space, is also sucked up by mass culture – or, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, the culture industry. There, everything looks alike and all media employ the same effects and aesthetics: “Today's culture makes everything look the same.”^{xiii} Differences in quality and execution are precisely calculated to preserve the important consumerist illusion of a freedom of choice that is, in effect, non-existent. Adorno and Horkheimer note how, in the culture industry, the modernist work's interest in detail and element rather than the whole – as seen in music, painting and literature – is swallowed up by undifferentiated totality. In *Circus Pentium* and many other works, Plenge Jakobsen questions this undifferentiation, trying to reestablish discontinuity, delay and desire in an irrational, labile system of references and aesthetics. *Circus Pentium* is an image – or, perhaps, a prediction – of the demise of the late capitalist universe.

Late Capitalism and Radical Change

The fundamental Marxist idea of the interconnection of matter in a big, flexible system in continuous motion that is constantly shifting the relations between things

and their meanings can be seen as a stream running through many of Henrik Plenge Jakobsen's works. *Dialectic Materialism*, a 2003 installation featuring the basic industrial and commercial commodities of coffee, coal, steel and flour, functions as a direct reference to the Marxist conceptual complex. "The ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought," Karl Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*.^{xiv} Extending my discussion of his implementation and use of existing materials and found objects, this observation might serve as a description of Plenge Jakobsen's working method.

To Plenge Jakobsen, Marxism represents the last universal alternative with which modern civilization has been presented.^{xv} His works show his interest in such all-embracing, often utopian, models for structuring society and, perhaps even more so, their impossibility or outright collapse. The recognition of solidity's dualistic connection to immateriality expressed in the Marx/Engels quote, "All that is solid melts into air,"^{xvi} is all but emblematic of Plenge Jakobsen's practice. His sculptures, installations and performances operate as constellations of references, symbols and objects, the individual meaning and tangibility of their elements fusing in airy complexity. Conventional structures and meanings are supplanted by new, changeable relations between objects, ideas and references.

A recent construction of late capitalism is the Nasdaq exchange for IT stocks. The phenomenon fascinates Plenge Jakobsen because it corrupts a core point of historical capitalism stating that value is tied to a product. Information technology is a total fiction, an immaterial construction of value that bears a certain resemblance to art and art's way of constructing meaning and value. That is the point of Plenge Jakobsen's text *Spectacle Economy, Nasdaq, Speculative Corrections and Investing in the Fake*,^{xvii} which formulates an original critique of the new market development taking off from Gordon Matta-Clark's 1973 work *Fake Estates*. Plenge Jakobsen based his painting *Nasdaq Forever* from 2000 on the color codes of the Nasdaq website as it looked then. The title of the exchange is presented as a brand or logo for a commercial product, not unlike the Swedish artist Övind Fählström's classic *ESSO-LSD* from 1967, consisting of two signs; one with the original ESSO logo and the other spelling "LSD" in an identical design and typeface.

An early precursor of *Nasdaq Forever* was *Double Helix Project*. For this 1997 work, Plenge Jakobsen invited Novo Nordisk, a Danish pharmaceutical company, to present its involvement in biotechnology at an exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. The company's stand was his contribution to the show. The concept has a reference to the Danish artist Poul Gernes, who at a 1970 exhibition, *Tabernakel*, also at the Louisiana, showed a series of products and text panels advertising various brands. But mainly, *Double Helix Project* highlights the technological and economic changes that biotechnology, in particular, is spearheading in late capitalist society.

The concept of radical change likewise underpins Plenge Jakobsen's preoccupation with disasters and accidents. According to the artist, the fascination with such violent events lies in their impact on the world and the fundamental changes they cause.^{xviii} The literary texts and quotes on which he bases his works tend to mark central historical shifts or actual social revolutions. *If the people have no bread, give them cake* from 2002, takes off from the apocryphal Marie Antoinette quote ("Let them eat cake") that acquired mythological significance for kick-starting the French Revolution. Plenge Jakobsen recently used Emile Zola's condemning *J'Accuse* as source for a large installation of the same name at the South London Gallery, in 2005. As noted, the Marxist concept of "dialectical materialism" was the premise of a major installation by the artist in 2003. These "found texts" have all been of crucial importance to modernity. Perhaps similar reflections inform Plenge Jakobsen's choice to construct many of his works around hallucinatory and euphoric states where the world is (apparently) radically changed, modern biotechnology and its unpredictable, fatal consequences or the chaotic, economic market systems of information technology organizing themselves outside the logic of conventional, rational commodity economies.

Plenge Jakobsen insists on art as a special field where exclusive forms of knowledge production and insight may occur. Accordingly, his works strive to define premises and categories that have not already been formulated and settled by society – in economics, institutions or the art market. One of art's most important privileges, as he sees it, is the ability to express complexity, doubt and oppositions in a reality where entertainment and ethics thrive on uniformity and simplification. This extends to actual art production and its laboratory-like way of working considered by Plenge

Jakobsen to be an aesthetic as well as a political statement capable of forming an alternative to the creations of mainstream culture and political reality. His work strives to innovate the foundation for thinking, creating and using art. “Nothing is eternal but eternally changing, eternally moving matter and the laws according to which it moves and changes,” Engels wrote in 1883, in the introduction to *Dialectics of Nature*.^{xix} This relativity and constant exchange in an ecosystem of matter and thought is a key point of Henrik Plenge Jakobsen’s artistic project.

ⁱ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848:

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

ⁱⁱ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas and Sternberg, New York 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Bolides*, which can be translated as “fireballs,” is a series of manipulable boxes and other types of containers that can be slipped into each other, opened and closed in various ways, or filled with earth or another flexible material that is transformed by someone sticking their hands into it.

^{iv} Hélio Oiticica, “Bolides,” October 29, 1963, reprinted in the catalogue *Hélio Oiticica*, Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris; Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro; Witte de With, Center of Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 1992, p. 66.

^v Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, conversation with Marianne Torp, August 2005.

^{vi} This definition is based upon Mikkel Bolt, *Den sidste avantgarde. Situationistisk Internationale hinsides kunst og politik*, Forlaget Politisk Revy, Copenhagen 2004, pp. 25-27, p. 384.

^{vii} The installation category in general seems to lack nuances for describing a great deal of contemporary art. Other terms, such as “display” and “tableau,” are coming into use and seem more apt. The Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, for one, uses the pragmatic term “display” for his works to distinguish them from the “installation,” category. See Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October*, no. 110, Fall 2004, p. 74.

^{viii} Since his first major installation, *Untitled (Still)*, at the 303 Gallery in New York, 1992, a working kitchen has been a recurring element in Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work, allowing the artist himself or the audience to prepare noodle dishes and curries. In 1991, Felix Gonzales-Torres started his series of candy spills – cellophane-wrapped caramels, bonbons or other candy in a big pile or spread across the floor for the audience to sample. Surasi Kusolwong contributed *Happy Berlin (Message)* to the 2001 Berlin Biennale, offering massages to the audience on padded tables. These are just a few examples of artworks offering direct audience involvement.

^{ix} Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, conversation with Marianne Torp, August 2005.

^x Op. cit.

^{xi} Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October*, No. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79.

^{xii} The project is an elaboration of *Circus Portikus*, an installation created for the Portikus exhibition space in Frankfurt, 2003, which, augmented with an opera, was shown at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen in 2005 as *Circus Pentium*.

^{xiii} Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Oplysningens dialektik. Filosofiske fragmenter*, 1944, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1993, p. 179. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 1944, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. ???)

^{xiv} Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol 1.

^{xv} Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, conversation with Marianne Torp, August 2005.

^{xvi} See Note 1.

^{xvii} Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, “Spectacle Economy, Nasdaq, Speculative Corrections and Investing in Fake” in *Remarks on Interventive Tendencies*, Borgens Forlag, 2001.

^{xviii} Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, conversation with Marianne Torp, August 2005.

^{xix} Friedrich Engels, “Introduction,” *Dialectics of Nature*, 1883.