

Negation and *Con Amore*: Art at the Crossroads

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen interviewed by Lars Bang Larsen

Lars Bang Larsen: Let us begin with talking about the place you live and about your itinerary. It is characteristic of your generation that it works internationally and typically has been offered better conditions for producing and exhibiting abroad than by Danish institutions. In the Danish context it was until the late 1980s very unusual to leave the national art system: Today it is almost the other way around, as many young Danish artists leave for Berlin or elsewhere. But unlike many of your friends and colleagues you have chosen to stay in Copenhagen.

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen: I have spent four or five years outside of Denmark in France, Sweden and the US - but I got homesick... Even though the art scene here in Copenhagen is rather small, this is always where I have felt more at home. There has always been a core of people doing interesting work here in spite of this depressing brain drain with people moving abroad. Of course personal reasons - my partner Pernille and now my son Niels - were also central to my decision to remain here. Around 2000 I began feeling alienated towards this travelling circus that working with art can be. Spending every two or three weeks in a new place became destructive for my work process: it becomes enormously difficult to concentrate when you enter this trash-jet set frame of mind. You could also say that I am staying here in defiance. There is a resistance in Denmark against being a culture nation, despite all our wealth and popular education. Finally, there are some typically Nordic themes in my work such as angst and the pent-up soul... [laughs]

LBL: Let us stay with the existential themes a bit. You grew up in the suburbs, a middle class background that you share with many people in Denmark. One of the overarching subjects in your work is transgression – the desire to smash the framework. However in your case it isn't transgression in the old avant-garde sense but rather a deconstruction of this idea. Is this a way of staging or discussing the desire to break away to find an otherness that is kept out of the suburbs?

HPJ: I am a big escapist! I grew up close to Copenhagen and I have always made my escape attempts, like going to the bog to hang out on my own as a kid. In my early teens I discovered Copenhagen's post-punk music scene and mentally left the suburb. A lot of what I have become has been made possible by this anti-establishment youth culture – for the first time I met others with the same drive to pass up on car, house, suburb, dog. It is about not being able to stand the condition that you were meant for. It occurred to me, 'Should I make art?'

But being an artist is an act, a put-on, because basically the question is if there is an alternative. Is it a real alternative to choose between suburb and New York City? Whether you are an artist or a caretaker in a kindergarten, you still depend on what is happening on Wall Street (or you depend even more on it as an artist). There is a disappointment inherent in escapism because you never can get away. Transgression is thinking that you can perform a total and immediate transformation and make it into another state, another reality than the old one. If you look at the Sex Pistols, for

example, you have a double fake: they posed as transgressive but actually embodied a commercial stunt and some fashion interests.

As for my own work, I have never conceived of it as being radical. Rather there is a dream of radicalism in them. But it is impossible from where I stand: As a visual artist I produce imaginary spaces – that is all I can establish. And inasmuch as these spaces are fictitious they can never be transgressive.

LBL: In your recent work Marx has surfaced as a reference. Do you have the desire to translate your political concerns as a visual artist to self-organisation or activism?

HPJ: No. I was very involved in various movements when I was young. And I am not a Marxist – you could say that I am a disappointed Marxist. In the 20th century avant-gardes art has a strong connection to Marxism, and I believe that the Communist Manifesto still is a striking analysis. But what are Marx and Engels actually proposing as an alternative? The Soviet empire was hardly what they had in mind. I am very interested in the political legacy of countries where the communist movements have been strong, such as Italy or France. These are interesting to compare with the Scandinavian model and values that are being phased out now in the region, because it is what the corporate world wants. Marx's writing is very poetic and visionary, but at the end of the day the aesthetic dimension was left out of his philosophical system, which is why it could become a totalitarian ideology. It is too bad he never wrote his book about aesthetics.

LBL: But how can we invest art with particular ethical qualities? Seeing how Nazism aestheticized politics I am not sure if aesthetics is an antidote against totalitarianism. On the other hand, you said earlier that being an artist was an act, a put-on, which is a provocative idea and certainly at odds with that of art's ethical potential. Maybe you could expand a little about these things.

HPJ: Firstly, to pick up on Marx, I recently produced some balloons for a project on the trans Siberian railway where I printed a quote from Marx and Engel's communist manifesto, saying "all that is solid melts into air". The print on the balloon was in English and Russian, but I did not use the original Russian translation of the manifesto since it was translated into "all classes will disintegrate" instead of "all that is solid melts into air". So I had a new translation made in order to help Marx and Engels to appear more poetic and visionary in Russia today. But I think this little episode shows well how the communist regime was formed on the basis of a wrong translations. Totalitarianism and aesthetics are also interesting when it comes to Russian history since the regime in its very beginning instrumentalized cutting edge aesthetics during and immediately after the revolution, but these aesthetics, and artists like Mayakovsky, Malevich, Tatlin etc, were soon abandoned by the regime and some of them even banned, since their art was disturbing and presented an opposition to totalitarianism. In the case of the Nazi regime it was not really, as I see it, cutting edge aesthetics, but a wicked form of neo classicism that was employed, as was also the case in the heydays of Stalin with the glorification of the farmer and the worker. I do not think that aesthetics is an antidote to totalitarianism, but I do think that non-instrumentalised aesthetics within totalitarianism is an impossibility. Modern art needs capitalism and democracy. When it comes to the artist as act, I mean that art to me it is a fictitious frame or a kind of game if you want, and that is why art coagulates when it is instrumentalised: but it's a

fictitious space that can and has to talk about reality, ethics, and so on. The act has to have a form of purpose, but also is has to remain an act.

LBL: Some ten years ago you were working with an innovative type of body art in which the body was atomised, or indirectly represented. In these pieces the beholder was invited to perform, or the body was implicated through forms of ecstasy or intoxication. Over the last few years one can see a shift of focus in your work towards how economy and aesthetics overlap.

HPJ: I am still very interested in the field of biotechnology. Together with financial and digital services it is an avant-garde industry when it comes to globalisation and changing the premises of everyday life. My previous work was inspired by the biotech revolution and the way it provides the possibility to manipulate with the basis of life: today we find ourselves in a highly speculative economy whose accumulation is driven by the creative class, a class of designers, advertising people, and professionals in media and entertainment. It is crucial to investigate these vanguard phenomena to be able to diagnose everyday life.

LBL: But how do we counteract this accumulation, seeing we artists, curators and critics are ourselves part of the same creative class?

HPJ: I believe the creative class has devoured the idea of what it is to be an artist. To Adorno art was the only utopian possibility. In recent years I have thought a lot about the spectacle society and how social relations are conveyed through images. The autonomy that one could want for art is drained by the influx of money, by the media industries placing demands on art for its entertainment value etc. Even though artists must work with everyday life I believe the time has come for them to turn their backs on the world.

LBL: The artists should make an exodus from the mainstream?

HPJ: Yes, in a way. I don't believe in the ivory tower but the interests of capital are growing. Art should not be popular culture. I am not elitist; I am not out to exclude anybody, but art is not a service. We must fight for the imaginary space where one can operate differently, while simultaneously be aware of the world that we live in.

LBL: In recent works you have recuperated some of your own imaginary spaces from history. For example *J'Accuse*, and this brilliant piece called "If the People have no Bread, let them Eat Cake", where you coloured a flock of sheep purple and perfumed them.

HPJ: When you project history into the living present you can create a perspective that goes further than your ego or your own Earthly existence. The purple sheep are actually the enzyme of the French revolution! They stand for the depraved upper class which finally provokes the proles to react. The work is in fact based on a tall story about Queen Marie Antoinette: she did indeed have sheep to amuse herself and to perform as a shepherdess in her own pastoral fantasies in the park of Versailles, but it is never proven that she gave them a purple coiffure and perfumed them. The French revolution is one of the events that have really changed the world, together with the enlightenment.

A belief that things could be different... It is one of the building stones for my own thinking, which can be held up against the current global situation.

J'Accuse is a comment to contemporary international law in relation to the war against terror. It concerns a very famous miscarriage of justice in early 20th century France, a case in which the French army officer Dreyfus is wrongly accused and condemned for espionage. It is a case with anti-Semitic overtones, and the novelist Emile Zola wrote his famous essay - from which I have the title - in defence of Dreyfus. He is finally acquitted and in the wake of the case an addendum to the law is made that makes it explicit that religious or political belonging is above the law. So my installation is about possible ways to counteract the way that international law is being overruled today. It is an installation in a black and white design, but is actually about grey zones between religion, capitalism and the administration of justice.

LBL: Speaking of limit conditions, your works seem to be equally oriented towards both poles in dichotomies such as subversion and excess; and high culture and subculture. In your project there is at the same time room for both Miami Vice and Hans Haacke, so to say.

HPJ: I am fascinated by what is modern or pop in industrial standards and spectral colours, for example; surfaces coded as if they are palatable but turn out to be culturally unpleasant or having a dark backside. It has to be playful... and in order to be fun for me to do the works should have a visual entertainment value too. There is a broad field of formal options - wall painting, performance, sound, appropriation and so on. I am sometimes a little envious of Yves Klein who just had his blue colour - but such a practice is hardly possible today! [laughs]

But let me go back to what we talked about earlier regarding autonomy. What is at stake is to ask how we define our own premises? How do we avoid working on conditions already laid down by society? Take the *Populism* exhibition for example [*]. I think in many ways it had a lot going for it, but why was there so much George Bush and agendas dictated by the CNN? Why so many counter-images? We must implement our artistic laboratory, because in the idea of the lab you can keep the Bush administration and the art market out for a moment.

LBL: But the laboratory is a double-edged figure, isn't it. On the one hand it points to free experimentation, but on the other it indicates a state of isolation that prevents contact with elements from the outside world. Isn't the lab simply the suburb all over again - a measure against otherness?

HPJ: The question is what comes out of it? Art is not research as such. The frustration among many artists is that we don't have a purpose or can make a difference in the real world. Superflex's strategy is a case in point; they go beyond this purposelessness with their corporate infiltration and grass-roots initiatives. Normally I believe you can choose between entering the purpose-related, service-oriented art market, or the speculative art market, the gallery system and what follows from that. However, there must be some attitude that is not about structural alternatives, a position where one is in the world while at the same time maintaining a maximum of artistic integrity. Perhaps this is where something can happen. Still I always wonder why am I contributing - why do I add more things to the world?

LBL: Yes, but I'm wondering why you evoke the figure of autonomy. The reason why you can do what you do as an artist is because this modernist zoning off between life and art has collapsed. This is also something you have worked with yourself: in 1996 You organised a seminar called Social Plastic, which was one of the earliest initiatives in the 1990s to discuss art and social space. How did you get from 'social art' to autonomy? What is the connection?

HPJ: Of course the autonomous and the 'social' art work are two opposed movements in art. The social intervention necessarily dissolves the figure of autonomy. I used to be very preoccupied with creating the art work that dissolves perfectly in its social context... one of the inspirations for this was Joseph Beuys's work and his involvement in real political processes, as a teacher and a co-founder of the Green Party in Germany. These are radical initiatives which should be considered part of his artistic practice. Also people and movements like Fluxus and the Situationists were sources for me in this respect.

But I came to a point where I was unable to defend working with dissolving the art work. It got out of control. In Beuys's time the institution was a lot less mobile and flexible, whereas today much artistic production is in itself a production of institutional context. I found some possibilities in considering autonomous space and on a different type of works which could insist on their own being. When you work in social space you easily end up getting the premises dictated to you by the very real economies that control everyday life, or the work simply becomes invisible. In any case, I know now that the autonomous space is the strongest resistance or otherness that I can contribute with. However, I have a lingering irritation about the fact that I can't produce the dissolved, utopian work – just like the perfectly autonomous work is also impossible, a dream.

LBL: I guess this conflict is also familiar from your experience of working between white cube projects and public ones. Working between the lab and the street so to speak.

HPJ: I did this internet project *Livecast* in 1996. That was probably my first public work, although public in a different sense than the traditional drop sculpture that sits in a park or a square. It was a live broadcast from the Institute of Biology at Copenhagen University, showing scientists working in a gene splicing lab.

Apart from that most of my public works have been simulations. In Kiel I did this surveillance tower, which in principle could have been there for real but also represents an absurdity, as if the city of Kiel would have started to install an old school form of surveillance of its citizens. It is incredibly interesting to get beyond the gallery space and work with other premises. You often end up facing quite unpredictable conflicts and compromising situations. Another element is that of forced spectatorship: you actually force the audience to relate to what you do. I have a lot of respect for that power relation, which also implies that you ethically speaking have to be on your toes. I find this combination of force and compromise in working with public art very alluring! The white cube is basically coded alike wherever you go, whether it is Stockholm or Marseille it is the same frame. But considered as public space Stockholm and Marseille are extremely different in terms of politics, economies, cultures.

LBL: This discussion about power relationships in public space is perhaps a different twist on what Poul Gernes proposed in the 1970s concerning the monument as something that produces popular identity and democratic belonging. You employ some

of the same strategies as he did – the spectacular industrial colours and the politics of scale for example – but you invest them with dissonance and negation.

HPJ: By pointing to dissonance and melancholy you find a negative starting point for a continuous discussion: what is the legitimacy of the way we have structured our society? What do we have to face to live and die? That is what I want to ask. Social art projects are typically conceived as positive meeting points, and since the late 1990s we have seen an endless number of bars and cinemas, to a degree that cinemas and bars have in themselves become a genre. The Danish artist Fos did a public bar at Israels Plads in 1999, and this turned out to be a different kind of meeting point: it was actually a kind of enlightenment project, with talks and events. Projects like these make Rirkrit Tiravanija's and Douglas Gordon's film bar from 1996 look like a kind of fancy hang-out, although this bar for other reasons also was a brilliant piece.

LBL: To me this feel-good aspect was the biggest miss with Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. Here the term "social" was loaded with all the positive connotations but not the violence and exclusion that also underpins social space.

HPJ: And in the end it wasn't as inclusive a notion as he perhaps would have liked it to be. Many of the artists he talks about have a perfectly traditional practice. Jes Brinch and I took part in *Traffic* in 1996, the exhibition Nicolas did at the CAPC in Bordeaux to introduce Relational Aesthetics. We participated with a social sculpture encouraging people to hang out. But *Traffic* - with all its interactive art - became a totally different exhibition after the in-crowd had left. I think that was a disappointment to everyone, and to me a big part of my disappointment about social sculpture. I think that this positivist attitude that is somehow required when working with social sculpture is often what dissolves the strength of the intention.

However, in *Traffic*, the way the curator became an interlocutor on the basis of Relational Aesthetics as a kind of manifesto was very positive: a group show that comes with a statement is unfortunately a rare thing.

LBL: At the beginning of this interview you polemically diagnosed the art world as a "trash jet-set". So let me be polemic back and ask if this diagnosis of yours is motivated by ambition or if it is a criticism of working conditions? My point is, of course we tend to spend a lot of time travelling, but on the other hand it is a success criterion to be paid to travel. So what is your expectation to working with art – is it to drop the trash and become real jet set?

HPJ: I probably belong to the first generation of a broad field of artists who circulate internationally on often fairly bad conditions. I'm not aiming at a business class life style: rather the discussion goes back to an old dispute about how to get paid for your work. As an artist you often get a really bad deal in relation to working in the corporate world - or the rest of the corporate world, you might say! - or in relation to somebody working in the public sector. There is still a resistance in the art institutions towards professionalizing art. You often have to ask to get paid a fee, which is something that should be routine. Some institutions are working tip top but there is a long way home. The other aspect is that working as an artist isn't at all the kind of jet-set life that you might imagine it to be. This whole class of artists perpetuates a dream of freedom which might have strong limitations. There is a kind of perdition in the fascination of travelling around, and you can lose yourself in this success criterion. The last ten years a

kind of hallucination has been going on that the best place to get new ideas for your work is in an airplane. For some people it can work, but is it really what you want? However, the big advantage is that you get to know a lot of people from all over, the US, Japan, Thailand and so on.

LBL: What are you looking forward to do next?

HPJ: There are some film or video projects I would like to embark on. I have an idea for a sci-fi project, a follow up of *Circus Pentium*, and I am keen to give the social sculpture one more try... I am also working on a sculpture project which is a follow-up on the Adorno works, exploring ideas around the object.

I have been familiar with Adorno as a composer for many years before I read him. The 12-tone music that he made himself a spokesman of is today considered a failure, a phasing out of classical music that never became the authority it was intended to be. For the Adorno exhibition at Frankfurter Kunstverein I DJ'd some of his twelve-tone music for the opening, from the time when he was a student of Anton Webern and Schönberg. I wanted it to be a sort of tongue-in cheek tribute, but it was fairly badly received by the opening crowd - ironically enough, because this was something Adorno fought for his whole life. He wasn't so much into the visual art of his contemporaries, but it was interesting to see how the post-conceptual work in the exhibition worked really well – it made much more sense to make an exhibition like this than showing the visual art of his time. But his music is still quite fresh and up to date.

LBL: What about collaborations?

HPJ: I have always had my own practice as the primary thing, but I have been involved in quite a few collaborations over the years – like with Jes Brinch, or *Remarks on Interventive Tendencies*, the seminar that you and I did together with Superflex in 1998, or the *Update* festival in 1996 that I organised together with Jonas Maria Schul, Michael Elmgreen, Jens Haaning and a number of other people. Collaboration is a way to challenge ideas of what an artist is. Lately I have been quite self-centred you know! [laughs] But some of those collaborative energies can be picked up again of course... Recently I worked together with the composers Dan Marmorstein and Goodiepal for *Circus Pentium*, but in this case they worked more as artists contributing to my project than as actual collaborators. Together with Jakob Boeskov I am working on an idea for a collaboration in Russia.

Also, circumstance tends to provoke collective action. In Copenhagen around 1990 there was no infrastructure and absolutely nothing was going on, so we were practically speaking forced to collaborate. Obviously the institutional infrastructure here is still a disaster, in terms of the programming of museums and public galleries. It makes me sad on a daily basis that you can't just pop out and see a great solo exhibition of Adrian Piper, Simon Starling or some of my Danish colleagues.

LBL: Yeah, *Update* was amazing. It was a shame you never produced the *Update* catalogue, because that project was one of the most energetic projects I have ever seen – the way it was at the same time a concert venue for electronic music and a constantly changing art exhibition. And it is always that kind of anarchistic projects that are forgotten.

HPJ: Strangely enough it seems that the spirit is still around. You could argue that a project like *Utopia Station* is the mainstream version of *Update*. Concerning the catalogue, we were absolutely shot when it was over: we never wanted to have to deal with *Update* ever again, so we dropped the catalogue... The whole thing went really well though, we didn't go over budget, everybody worked for free and I met tons of cool people who came flying in simply because they liked the ideas behind it. It was full-on con amore and a key moment in my life as an artist.

The interview was made in Copenhagen on May 19 and June 23, 2005.

[*] The Populism exhibition was a group show on the theme of political and artistic populisms taking place in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Oslo and Vilnius in the spring and summer of 2005. Jakobsen participated as an artist and Larsen was one of the curators.