

Public Matters

Exactly 40 years after the construction of the Wall which brutally divided the city of Berlin, Henrik Plenge Jakobsen is planning to erect a watch-tower right in the centre of Kiel. The watch-tower will be placed in a recreational park, next to the road which separates the two Kleiner Kiel lakes. It is one of the approach roads leading into downtown Kiel and thus there will be a number of passing subjects to monitor from the tower, from cars and cyclists to skaters and swans.

Inspired by a prison surveillance tower in Berlin, Plenge Jakobsen's watch-tower in Kiel will be a simple, square building made of grey concrete with golden toned perspex windows inserted into its upper section. In the idyllic park area the tower will inevitably be disturbing and quite dominating in appearance as it rises 6 meters from the ground with a ground plan measuring 2.30 m square. It is not hard to anticipate the clear power relation between the volume and stability of the crude watch-tower and the passers-by in the peaceful park.

Standing on its own in the quiet park, the watch-tower, being the icon of the Cold War era, will have certain similarities to a war memorial commemorating events of the past. But Plenge Jakobsen's concern is rather the contemporary.

Upon entering the tower one will be able to climb up a set of iron steps inside to reach the surveillance platform. Standing on the platform looking through the dark windows one will have a fine view of the activities below. But something has changed. The world looks different through the eyes of a watchman. The people who might at first have been frightened by the monumentality of the tower are actually allowed access to the building and may thus become part of its sinister set-up. The sudden change of perception caused by the act of entering and climbing up the watch-tower forces the questions: who are the good guys and who are the bad? And whose side are you on?

The park is surrounded by several bank headquarters. With imposing façades and shiny logos they take up prominent city space. Thus placed in the middle of Kiel's financial district and not far from the actual Ministry of Justice of Schleswig-Holstein, Plenge Jakobsen's watch-tower could appear somewhat unsubstantial. But it will certainly become an unsettling neighbour for these influential institutions. In fact, the watch-tower seems persistent in its determination to interact with its surroundings, both on a physical and on a psychological level.

In his extensive artistic practice Henrik Plenge Jakobsen repeatedly investigates the fundamental structures and conditions of Modernism. In his vibrant wall paintings he re-deploys formal elements like colours and geometrical shapes. Yet he burrows below the surface of characteristic Modernist aesthetics. He looks into the human state of mind and he examines institutions which play a vital role in contemporary society such as the mental hospital or the prison. These are institutions indispensable to society just like courts, kinder gardens and police stations. Backed by the art institution Plenge Jakobsen's tower will – as a manifestation of a specific kind of state control – stand as a metaphor for the larger institution of society itself. However, in Plenge Jakobsen's work it is not the institution as such which is under scrutiny but the repressing power it may exercise. With the watch-tower Plenge Jakobsen touches on the very dichotomy of surveillance, that between controlling and taking

care of people. Is the uninviting building in the park a threatening control tower or might there be someone up there who watches over me as I take a short cut through the park at night?

Henrik Plenge Jakobsen is no newcomer on the public art scene. As part of the exhibition "Do All Oceans Have Walls?" in Bremen in 1998 he created what looked like a city flat on fire by using light equipment and smoke machines. Similar to the watch-tower in Kiel, the staged fire in Bremen would seem sinister and alarming at first sight. However, on closer inspection one would discover that the extraordinary spectacle was strictly controlled; the fake fire took place at 3 set times every day during the exhibition and it soon turned into a well-attended performance. Thus Plenge Jakobsen's works, the watch-tower in Kiel included, often oscillate between Angst and Tivoli – touching on both familiar fright and popular amusement. Or rather, the works succeed in unifying the two seemingly contradictory elements. It is exactly the uncanny balance between horror and happiness which is at the core of his work. Because who knows, once erected, will the wicked watch-tower end up as a harmless playground for the school kids of Kiel?

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Local politicians risk their skin by approving of public art works. As numerous examples show, the politicians will be blamed immediately by local citizens and businesses if the work of art is not to their taste. Obviously, politicians are utterly dependent on the opinion of the people. Daniel Buren has suggested that this is the exact reason why good and interesting works of art are rarely seen in the so-called public space.

Henriette Bretton-Meyer Berlin, August 2001