

JEPPE HEIN

JANUARY 30–MARCH 29, 2009

Please Please Please

Please Do Not Touch the Artwork, in glaring red neon, is the first thing to be seen upon entering Jeppe Hein's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery. Confronting the visitor at the entrance to the gallery, it is a strict reminder of one of the rules of etiquette usually expected in the context of an art gallery. It is also an instruction that a visitor to the exhibition may find difficult to follow.—————

The forms and materials of Hein's work are self-evident and literal, declared in their tacit presence as well as their unadorned titles. *Shaking Cube* is, literally, a shaking cube: an aluminum volume of modest size – a mere half-meter on edge – it is programmed to shake when a visitor comes near. But such self-evident features are not all or sufficient to account for the work and its effect on a viewer. Despite the notice in the work's title, the shaking of the cube takes the visitor by surprise; it seems an unwarranted and uncanny behavior in an object that is the epitome of solidity and stability.—————

In contradiction to the modernist axiom that a rose is a rose is a rose, for Hein the cube is not merely a cube but the elementary form of sculpture in the minimalist mode. Hein has made many cubes. Constructed of aluminum, neon, or broken mirrors; with sensor arrays that respond to the viewer's presence and electronic parts that cause them to walk or collapse or burst into flames; these cubes nevertheless recall the manufactured aesthetic of Minimal Art. Within a current aesthetic discourse that takes relationality and performativity as a matter of course, Hein's revisiting of the minimalist canon inspires a historical double-take. Like the minimalists before him, Hein works with the presence of the object, the space that it occupies and the physical participation of the spectator as a unified ensemble. He has

taken the "theatricality" of minimalist sculpture so derided by Michael Fried¹ and turned it into an opportunity for the viewer to play with the work. To say that Hein's work is playful seems obvious but requires that a certain distinction be made: the work is playful not merely as a kind of amusement but in a more serious sense of discovering and using the sources of perceptual pleasure.²—————

More importantly, Hein has taken the materialist, literalist agenda of minimalism to launch his own investigation of "the real." It is a challenge to conceive the material reality of *Invisible Cube*. Using motion sensors and alarms to define a cubic space within the otherwise empty space of the existing gallery, *Invisible Cube* cannot be perceived until the viewer walks into it, causing alarms to sound. The more viewers there are in the space, the more obvious this mechanism becomes. Upending the museum convention of alarming the space immediately in front of pictures in order to keep visitors from getting too close to the artwork, here the visitor must stay close to the wall to look at the work displayed there. Beyond a narrow perimeter in front of the wall, the visitor comes into full body contact with the work itself. No matter how much a visitor may wish to respect the "proper" decorum of not touching the work, such an imperative is impossible if one is to experience the work at all. Through this Hein affirms the active role of the spectator in the creation of the work, while accommodating the possibility of non-engagement. Making it something of a game sustains the condition of non-judgement.———
On the other hand, it could be argued that walking into the alarmed space isn't actually touching the work, there being no palpable physical sensation for the visitor in the event. In either case, non-compliance with *Please Do Not Touch the Artwork* may provide

an uneasy satisfaction for the non-conformist, or cause discomfort for the obedient, but the conundrum cannot be ignored. Thus the material reality of the work encompasses the pre-existing space, the social conventions that govern its use (including the request to refrain from touching the work), the specific interaction of visitors with these elements, and the social and ethical positions of an individual that might inflect their response. This last element shows the distance Hein has moved from the precepts of minimalism, from a situation that was theorized strictly within phenomenological bounds, to creating situations – relational and performative in the ways that even minimal art subscribed to – that open onto a broadly positive humanistic dimension.

Christina Ritchie

- 1 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp 148–172.
- 2 Christine Macel, "Jeppe Hein: Re-enacting the Labyrinth" in *Jeppe Hein Until Now*, Koenig Books London, 2006. Macel relates Hein's sense of play to the practice of playing music, dance or poetry and highlights the game-like nature of his work.

BIO

Jeppe Hein is emerging as an influential artist within international art circles. In 2007 he exhibited *Objects in the Mirror are Closer than They Appear*, Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain, Nîmes, France; *In-between*, SCAI, The Bathhouse, Tokyo and *Distance and The Curve*, Barbican Art Centre, London, UK. He has most recently presented *From Seriousness to Silliness* a collaborative exhibition with Dan Graham at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich; *PLEASE...*, 303 Gallery, New York, and *Modified Social Benches*, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany. He is represented by Johan Konig, Berlin and 303 Gallery, New York.

ARTIST TALK

by Jeppe Hein as part of the Emily Carr University Speaker Series
Wednesday, January 28, 7pm at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design,
1399 Johnston Street, Granville Island, Room 301.

Jeppe Hein is presented by VANOC, and sponsored by the Vancouver Foundation.
Our education programmes are generously sponsored by Connor, Clark and Lunn.

Connor, Clark & Lunn
INVESTMENT MANAGEMENT LTD.

©2009 Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of the writer or publisher.
ISBN: 978-1-897302-32-3

The Contemporary Art Gallery is generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council, the BC Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch and the BC Arts Renaissance Fund which is administered by Vancouver Foundation. We are grateful for the support of Vancouver Foundation and our members, donors and volunteers.