

# New Yorkers Get a Playground in Jeppe Hein's Interactive Sculpture Park

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Jeppe Hein, 2012. Photo: apropos\_Foto

At Brooklyn Bridge Park, Danish artist Jeppe Hein is inviting people to interact both with his sculpture and each other in his largest U.S. exhibition to date, “Please Touch the Art,” presented by Public Art Fund. Hein’s fountains, which form a kind of liquid architecture; his reflective maze; and his 16 fancifully shaped benches positioned throughout the landscape all put friends, family, and strangers in unexpected proximity. “I’m trying to create a dialogue between people across different ages and cultural backgrounds and skin colors,” says the 40-year-old artist now based in Berlin, where he runs a studio of 20 people who help him produce projects around the world. “It creates a social playground.”



Jeppe Hein  
*Appearing Rooms*, 2004  
Public Art Fund

In *Appearing Rooms*—one of his fountain installations that were first shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale—walls of water rise up seven feet and then fall according to a programmed cycle, creating rectangular rooms that people can move between, with or without getting wet. “You may be standing inside alone and suddenly someone jumps into your room of water, which could be intimidating but also nice,” says Hein, who continually experiments in his work with how the element of play can dissolve boundaries and foster empathy between people.

Visitors can get pleasantly disoriented navigating *Mirrored Labyrinth*, composed of reflective stainless-steel vertical posts spaced equidistantly in three arcs, which form an open circle at the center. “The mirrors are mixing reflections of you and the surroundings and it’s hard to tell where

people are—if they're inside or outside the labyrinth," says Hein. It's a dichotomy the artist explores throughout this show, as well as in his exhibition currently on view at 303 Gallery in Chelsea. "It also reflects the Manhattan skyline. The park is a platform to look at Manhattan, in a way. I like the dialogue between the two parts of the city."



Jeppe Hein  
*Mirror Labyrinth NY*, 2015  
Public Art Fund



Jeppe Hein  
*Modified Social Bench #05*, 2015  
Public Art Fund

Hein gives new twists, literally, to the ubiquitous park bench with his bright red *Modified Social Benches*, which are hybrids of sculptures and functional objects. Some rise up like a hill, creating a slide, or droop in the middle so sitters collide. Another swoops like a figure eight, positioning people face-to-face in the round. "The benches create a smile when you see them because they're not normal looking," says Hein, who for the last decade has studied how people from different societies behave when confronted with his altered benches installed in public spaces—in cities including Auckland, Singapore, Indianapolis, Paris, Liverpool, and Helsinki. "I'm trying to lift people out of their everyday lives and open their eyes to something new."

Hein has been creating installations outdoors since his childhood in the countryside of Denmark, where he grew up on a small organic farm and built mazes out of bales of hay. As a teenager he learned skilled carpentry and, after experiencing a euphoric feeling at 16 while making a

watercolor in his stepfather's painting studio, decided to pursue art. He graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Arts in Copenhagen in 1997, and then moved to Frankfurt to study at the Städelschule for two more years. As a student in Copenhagen, he worked as an assistant to the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, internationally renowned for his experiential artworks that simulate natural phenomena like waterfalls and rainbows. "Olafur was a mentor for me," says Hein. "His works completely open your heart, which was very interesting to me as a young artist."



Jeppe Hein  
*Mirror Labyrinth* NY, 2015  
 Public Art Fund

Hein made his first interactive artwork in 2000 titled *Moving Wall #1* for the Stockholm Art Fair. The act of sitting on an ordinary gallery bench against a wall activated a sensor that initiated a perpendicular partition to slide slowly out of that wall, creating a private area for the sitter. It retracted when the visitor stood. "It was just amazing to see people playing with creating their own space and how much they enjoyed being a part of it," says Hein. Ever since, using subtle tricks of movement, everyday functional objects, and simple materials including water, mirrors, smoke, and neon, Hein has created perceptually challenging and engaging environments.



Jeppe Hein  
*Modified Social Bench #06*, 2015  
 Public Art Fund



Jeppe Hein  
*Appearing Rooms*, 2004  
 Public Art Fund

If his Brooklyn Bridge Park show is decidedly extroverted, his current exhibition at 303 Gallery offers a more introverted counterpoint. “All We Need Is Inside,” the title of the show, is literally spelled out in neon inside a wall piece covered by a two-way mirror, which allows viewers to reflect on themselves and the message simultaneously. Alongside other mirrored pieces, *Breathing Watercolours (Wallpaper)* (2015) covers a long wall with parallel vertical strokes of tranquil blue watercolor, each line the measure of a single deep inhale or exhale by the artist, who is interested in focusing awareness on the largely unconscious act of breathing as another form of reflection. The artist’s breath is also captured inside *Breath* (2015), composed of 21 blown glass spheres tinted delicate shades of blue, green, purple, and brown, and of slightly variable dimensions, resting in a line on the floor.

“It was important to say that something was inside and something was outside,” says Hein of his glass spheres containing breath. “In New York, there’s a lot about being inside and outside in different circles. It’s an interesting dialogue to have in terms of this city.”

—Hilarie M. Sheets

*“Jeppe Hein: Please Touch the Art” is on view at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, May 17, 2015–Apr. 17, 2016.*

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